

A VISION FOR HEALTHY CHURCH GROWTH
IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF
GORDON-CONWELL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY
VITALIE FEDULA
MAY 2008

Copyright © by Vitalie Fedula. All rights reserved.

DEDICATION

First, for the privilege of studying and working on this topic, I dedicate this thesis to my dear Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ! He is the only one worthy of all praise!

Second, with gratitude I dedicate this work to my dear wife, Larisa, who is a wonderful gift from the Lord, my dear life partner, my best friend, a wise encourager, a great helper, a faithful colleague, and a godly mother of our daughter, Corina.

Third, I dedicate this thesis to all pastors and church ministers who dedicate their lives to serve God's precious, divine institution, his church.

Everything in our lives, including this thesis, is a gift from him and through him, and to him be all the glory!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vi
ABSTRACT	viii
Chapter	
1. IDENTIFICATION OF THE PROBLEM	1
Introduction	1
The Purpose of the Study	6
The Importance of Church Growth	14
The Significance of Church Growth	19
The Nature of Healthy Church Growth	32
The Methodology	40
2. THE BIBLICAL IDENTITY OF A HEALTHY, GROWING CHURCH	44
Introduction	44
The Biblical Church's Identity in the Twenty-first Century	47
The Dangers of Compromising the Church's Identity	49
The Biblical Approach to the Church's Identity	54
Conclusion	84
3. THE BIBLICAL PURPOSES OF A HEALTHY, GROWING CHURCH	87
Introduction	87
A Biblical Approach to the Purposes of the Church	96
Conclusion	176

4. OBSTACLES TO HEALTHY CHURCH GROWTH	177
An Analysis of the Survey	177
The Main Obstacles to Healthy Church Growth	183
Conclusion	214
5. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR HEALTHY CHURCH GROWTH	216
Inadequate Approaches to Church Growth	216
Principles of Healthy Church Growth	220
Conclusion	264
6. GENERALIZATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS	267
APPENDIX	279
BIBLIOGRAPHY	284
VITA	289

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I praise God for his work of grace in my life. By his grace he has called me and given the wonderful privilege to be his child and serve his divine institution on this earth, his church. Also, I praise and thank God for his indescribable gift and privilege of studying church growth principles. I wish to express my profound thanks and appreciation to Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary for the wonderful privilege and opportunity to become part of the beautiful Gordon-Conwell family and to study toward the Doctor of Ministry degree.

It is my joy and privilege to acknowledge a number of God's people who have helped me to develop this project from thesis to workable ministry. By no means do these names represent all of God's great people who have encouraged me along the way. For any friends whose names do not appear here, I want to say that their names are known by our heavenly Father, and they are in my heart. However, at least some of them must be remembered.

I wish to thank God for Larisa, my dear wife, who is a wonderful gift from the Lord, my dear life partner, my best friend, a wise encourager, a great helper, a faithful colleague, and a godly mother of our great gift from the Lord, our daughter, Corina. Through all this time they have been a great blessing and support.

I am especially grateful to God for my wonderful mentors, men after God's own heart, Dr. Stephen Macchia and Dr. Rod Cooper. During this

process, they have been more than professors; they became my best brothers in Christ, friends through whom God touched my life and ministry.

Thanks go to Grace Chapel in Lexington, Massachusetts, which sponsored the scholarship for this program. Through all these years, this church became a home and a lovely family. I thank God for every Grace Chapel member who has kept me in his or her prayers. Especially I thank God for the godly leaders I have met at Grace Chapel: for the senior pastor, Bryan Wilkerson, a great man of God and a friend; for Richard Rhodes and David Jebaratnam, who told me about this program; Paul Borthwick; Barry O'Brian; and many others. Especially I would like to thank God for the Moldova committee from Grace Chapel. This is a wonderful team with a special heart for Moldova's people. All of them are great men and women of God, but I wish to name two of them, Larry Anzivino and Steve Hamilton. Through the years, they have been real blessings from the Lord.

Also, I thank God for Linda Triemstra, who edited the thesis.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the encouragement and support of Jesus Savior Church from Chisinau, Moldova, where God gave me the privilege to grow and serve his people as the senior pastor. I thank God for our great members and pastoral staff who prayed for me, supported me, and encouraged me through this process and gave me the privilege to implement all that God has taught me during this time.

I pray that God will use this study as a small tool to encourage others. May God continue to grow his church, and may God alone be glorified.

ABSTRACT

This thesis project emphasizes that healthy, growing churches understand who they are (identity), where they want to go (call), and how they intend to get there (strategy). Predominantly this thesis is intended to be a resource and a guide for pastors and Christians from Eastern Europe and Moldova who pray and want God's church to grow and advance. Also, this research will be used as academic material in the College of Theology and Education in Moldova and as inspirational material for pastors' conferences.

The thesis highlights that today we desperately need a renewed biblical understanding of the church's divine identity and divine call. We need a church renewal that will re-establish Jesus Christ, God's Word, and the Holy Spirit at the foundation and at the center of all the church's being and doing.

This thesis begins with the recognition that church growth is not an option; it is a divine mandate. Jesus promised to build his church; therefore, church growth and advance are unstoppable. Chapter 1 speaks about the importance and significance of church growth. Chapter 2 provides a biblical and a theological understanding of the church's identity. Chapter 3 is based on chapter 2 and explores the church's purposes. Chapter 4 reflects on the main obstacles to healthy church growth, obstacles that have been discovered in a number of surveys among pastors and churches from Moldova. Chapter 5 reflects practical implications for healthy church growth in Moldova. And finally, chapter 6 includes generalizations and conclusions.

Chapter 1

IDENTIFICATION OF THE PROBLEM

INTRODUCTION

Jesus replied, . . “I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”

—Matthew 16:18

Why is church growth so important today? How can a church grow and be healthy? These kinds of questions are so relevant, because there is no greater privilege and joy on this earth than to see God’s church growing and advancing.

As a child who grew up under the communist empire, I remember very well those days when Christians, because of our faith in God, were persecuted and slighted by teachers and the government. In those days, the pastor came and said that according to a new decision from Moscow, children of church members were not allowed to attend church anymore. Almost every day, our teachers would try to force us to abandon our beliefs by reminding us that Nikita Khrushchev¹ promised to show on television in 1980 the last Baptist and the last Bible. Therefore, they said, the church did not have any future or any hope to advance and expand, especially in the Soviet Union.

But, on September, 11, 1971, Nikita Khrushchev died, and on Christmas Day in 1991, the Soviet Union officially ended its own existence,

¹ He served as First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1953 to 1964, following the death of Joseph Stalin.

marking the end of more than seventy years of repression. However, the church of Christ continues to grow and expand in powerful and impressive ways, because Jesus promised, “I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matthew 16:18). The fall of the Soviet Union brought great opportunities for the church to grow and advance in the fifteen republics of the former Soviet Union.

For example, before the fall of the Soviet Union, there were about 100 Baptist churches with about 10,000 members in Moldova, but since 1991 God has blessed the Union of Christian Evangelical Baptist Churches of Moldova² in a tremendous way. In 2008, there are more than 500 churches with more than 20,000 members.

The author of this thesis has been blessed by the Lord to be part of the fast church growth in Moldova. In 1990, a small group of believers from the Russian church felt God’s call to plant a church for Moldovan speakers in the center of Chisinau, the capital city of Moldova. That beginning was small, but the work of God in that church was powerful and great. Therefore, the church baptized more than 100 people every year. And today, by God’s grace, this church has become the largest church in the country; it has more than 1,400 members.

² The first known Baptists in the region were nine people baptized by German Baptists in Turtinon in 1876. The first Russian congregation began in Kishinev in 1908. German Baptists formed an association in 1907, and Russian-speaking Baptists formed one in 1920. Under control of the USSR, Baptists and other Christians became restricted in their religious activities. The present Baptist Union was formed in 1991. The Union is a member of the European Baptist Federation and the Baptist World Alliance.

The growth of this and other churches has been an inspiration and a challenge for the author to do research in this area, research that will inspire other ministers and churches to grow and advance for God's glory.

Therefore, the author of this thesis considers that the greatest need of the church today is not a new philosophy, a new theology, new structures, or new programs, for all these without Jesus Christ are like a body without the head. Today the church desperately needs a renewed biblical understanding of its divine identity and divine call, because its identity is the foundational factor that determines the church's call. An authentic identity is Christ-centered, based on the Word of God, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Consequently, the contemporary church needs renewal that will re-establish Jesus Christ, God's Word, and the Holy Spirit's power and guidance as the center of the church's being and doing.

This thesis project addresses a challenge and a call for the local church to understand its divine identity and its divine call. Growing churches understand who they are, where they want to go, and how they intend to get there. This project will lead toward a vision for authentic church growth for churches from Eastern Europe and especially for Moldova. This vision will include the most significant principles and factors that are necessary for healthy church growth.

For the church, today is a time between the past, when the church was firmly established in Christendom, and an unclear future. Today is a time for redefinition; it is a time for the church to listen to its stories, to talk about its

direction and identity, and to patiently discern the shape of its future life and ministry.³

During his earthly ministry, Jesus uttered one of the most important statements about the church: “I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matt 16:18).⁴ These words reflect at least three important aspects that should be understood and remembered by all local churches in the twenty-first century. First, we observe in this verse that Jesus Christ established the church, and he continues to build and grow his church. Second, we observe that Jesus is the owner of the church; it is not our church. Therefore the name of Christ, his life and character, and his principles are to be at the center of the church’s work on earth. And third, we discover that Jesus Christ will protect his church, and its mission and goals will be accomplished. No one can stop a church from growing if at the center of that church is Jesus Christ, God’s Word, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

When Stuart K. Weber comments on this passage, he says that nothing can overpower or silence Christ’s community of faith, not even the power of death. His church will go on, even if its individual members should die.⁵ It is the vision of Christ for his church that its health and its resulting strength will be such that the evil in the world will not be able to overcome it.⁶

³ Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will Together* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1997), 12.

⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references are from the New International Version.

⁵ Stuart K. Weber, *Holman New Testament Commentary, Matthew* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 250-51.

⁶ Robert White, *Healthy Kingdom Churches* (Friendswood, TX: Baxter Press, 2002), 24.

We are not called to make the church grow.⁷ The Bible tells us clearly that God makes his church grow and advance. But for church growth to happen, we are called to be what God has intended for us to be, and we are called to do what God has intended us to do.⁸ In other words, the church's first preoccupation should not be growth, but rather the church should be preoccupied with what God wants his church to be and then with what God wants his church to do. And when a local church is being what God wants it to be, then its doing will flow inevitably from its being.

A proper understanding of the biblical characteristics of the church helps us to develop a better understanding of the church's goals and mission on earth. God's greatest concern for his church is for what the church is. Therefore, the being of the church must always precede the doing of the church, for what we do will be according to what we are.⁹ That is why a biblical understanding of the church's nature is a primary prerequisite for understanding God's call for the church.

This thesis is not meant merely to provide more information about church growth. One of the goals of this study is to refocus on God's plan and have a renewed understanding of the church's identity and God's goals for his church. In other words, it is an invitation to a deeper understanding of what God has called his church to be and do. When God's design and will for the

⁷ Kennon Callahan, *Effective Church Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), 19. He says that the church is called to share the kingdom, not to grow churches.

⁸ 2 Pet 1:2-11 speaks about our responsibility, too.

⁹ Ray Stedman, *Body Life* (Glendale, CA: Regal, 1972), 13.

church are ignored, that will become a great obstacle to the church's growth and advance.

Let us remember that the church belongs to Christ. He is the builder of the church; therefore, he is the one who must be given the credit for all true church growth.¹⁰ The only true growth is the growth that comes from God.

THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The main purpose of this study is to investigate the principles of healthy churches in Eastern Europe, especially in evangelical Baptist churches in Moldova. Specifically, this thesis-project serves as a challenge and a call for the local church, ministers, and church members to rediscover and understand the church's original identity and God's purposes as main factors for healthy church growth. If a church fails to understand and recognize its identity and call, then that church will not experience healthy church growth.

One of the main goals of this thesis is to emphasize that the world's greatest need is for a renewed biblical understanding of the church's divine identity and divine call. We need church renewal that will re-establish Jesus Christ at the center of church's identity and call. We need church renewal that will re-establish God's Word as the foundation of the church's identity and call. And we need church renewal that will re-establish the Holy Spirit as the

¹⁰ Gene Getz and Joe Wall, *Effective Church Growth Strategies* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 5.

one who guides the being and doing of all churches. If this renewal comes, then revival will come among churches and Christians.

In the last seventeen years, many countries in Eastern Europe, particularly the countries from the former Soviet republics, have been blessed with tremendous opportunities¹¹ for God's church to continue to grow and advance. And these favorable conditions are doubtless God's answer to many prayers during the communist persecution against the church. Many pastors and leaders have a deep inner conviction that we live in one of the most important times for the church in history, and many leaders have the feeling of urgency for church renewal. We now have freedom to preach and share the gospel. Because of economic, political, and social crises, people are looking for hope. But to take advantage of such opportunities, the church must be what its Lord has called it to be and do what its Lord expects and wants it to do. We must remember that Christ's church can offer to this world what no other institution can offer. That is why it is so important to have a clear understanding of God's plan for his church. Unfortunately, many church leaders and Christians are indifferent toward these great opportunities. According to a survey that this author made in March 2006, during a large conference for pastors, 90 percent of the pastors agreed that Christians' indifference and passivity is one of the highest obstacles to the church growth.

¹¹ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 15. In Warren's opinion, we live the most exciting time in history for the church. Unparalleled opportunities and powerful technologies are available to our congregations.

Throughout these opportunities for church growth, the church can fail into two extremes: to concentrate its efforts mainly on doing rather than on being or to concentrate more on being and less on doing. Either approach can get a church into a mood of indifference and self-satisfaction. Both attitudes are obstacles to healthy church growth.

Churches in the twenty-first century must realize that inside of our communities there is a strong need for a biblical balance between being and doing. We must learn from the apostolic church and be prepared for big opportunities for church growth. Rick Warren says, "I believe God is sending waves of church growth wherever his people are prepared to ride them. But because our churches haven't been taught the needed skills, we are missing the spiritual waves that could bring revival, health, and explosive growth to our churches."¹²

According to a survey among more than 80 pastors from Moldova, this author observed that each pastor wants the church he serves to grow. Most pastors understand the factors that promote church growth, and most of them are able to identify obstacles to church growth. But few of them know what needs to be done in order to resolve those problems or obstacles.¹³ This

¹² Ibid., 14.

¹³ In the survey that this author made in March 2006 were three main questions: What are the factors of church growth? What are the obstacles to church growth? What are your desires in the near future for the church you serve? According to this survey, the main factors involved in church growth are evangelism, passion for the lost, and sharing the Good News (88%); biblical teaching (79%); unity and fellowship in the church (69%); prayer (54%); a dedicated pastor or pastors (53%); good testimony by believers (43%); vision (34%). According to the survey, the main obstacles to church growth are indifference toward the world and ministry (90%); a bad Christian testimony (80%); lack of unity among leaders and members (46%); materialism (44%); a weak leader or pastor (34%); lack of vision (28%); weak preaching (26%); lack of prayer (9%). And according to the survey, the pastors' main desires for the

appears to be a common situation in many churches around the world. Trying to facilitate church growth, many churches have adopted different kinds of programs, methods, visions, and strategies. And too many were discouraged because these things could not fulfill their expectations and hopes for church growth. Ken Hemphill explains one main reason for this; in his opinion, the primary problem in churches is a spiritual one, not a methodological one.¹⁴

Churches are different, leaders are different, contexts are different, cultures are different, and capacities are different, but we must remember we have the same Lord and the same promise: "I will build my church." We have the same powerful Word of God that changes lives and provides universal principles that are applicable in every culture and every nation. We have the same power of the Holy Spirit that guides his church concerning what to be and what to do.

Therefore, this thesis will present a biblical and theological¹⁵ understanding of the church's goals, goals that must flow from the church's divine identity. Also, this thesis is intended to encourage each pastor and each church minister to continue to be faithful to God's Word, to continue to walk in the presence, in the power, and in the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and to re-establish Jesus Christ as the center of our lives, our families, and all of

future included to do more evangelism (20%); to increase unity among Christians (15%); to sustain and increase children's and youth ministry (10%); to pray more (3%); to work on a better Christian testimony (1.5%); to understand the vision (1.5%).

¹⁴ Ken Hemphill, *The Antioch Effect* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 10.

¹⁵ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 86. Most Christian leaders today raise psychological or sociological questions, even though they frame them in scriptural terms. Real theological thinking, which is thinking with the mind of Christ, is hard to find in the practice of ministry. Without solid theological reflection, future leaders will be little more than pseudo-psychologists, pseudo-sociologists, or pseudo-social workers.

our church's ministries. As pastors and ministers, we are called to serve not just a simple group of people; we are privileged to serve a divine institution, God's church. That is why the task of the future Christian leaders, as Henri Nouwen says, is not to make a little contribution to the solution of the pains and tribulations of their time but to identify and announce the ways in which Jesus is leading God's people out of slavery through the desert to a new land of freedom.¹⁶ And finally, this thesis is a call for all church leaders and members to continue to pray, to be faithful, to serve, to love God's church, and to let the Holy Spirit come into church life and enliven it with God's presence and power, thus helping God's church to grow and advance.

The main purpose of this study is to investigate the principles of a healthy church in the Eastern Europe, especially in evangelical churches from Moldova. Specifically, this thesis-project serves as a challenge and a call for the local church, ministers, and church members to rediscover and understand the church's original identity and God's purposes as main factors for healthy church growth. If a church fails to understand and recognize its identity and call, then that church will not experience healthy church growth. It is hoped that the lessons learned from this research will be beneficial to other local churches, particularly to the church's leaders from Moldova, to the students of the College of Theology and Educations from Chisinau, and to all those who are passionate for healthy church growth.

Also, this thesis is intended to be a source for pastors and Christians from Moldova who pray and want God's church to grow and advance in a

¹⁶ Ibid., 87.

healthy biblical manner. In the last few years in Moldova, more people are praying and talking about church growth and about a revival among God's people. This thesis also will be shared as inspirational material with many other leaders and pastors during pastors' conferences in the country. The results of the survey show that in Moldova there is a great need for pastors to be equipped. Most of these pastors are wonderful and great men of God, people who have made great sacrifices for the Lord and try to do their best for God's church. But because of the world's new challenges, they must have training.

Moreover, this thesis will be used in the equipping process at the College of Theology and Education in Moldova, where God gave this author the privilege and the grace to teach for more than ten years. The mission of the college is to prepare and equip young Christian men and women to serve in the church of Christ as pastors, evangelists, missionaries, Sunday school leaders, and social workers in Moldova, as well as in other countries in Eastern Europe, Middle Asia, and Asia Minor. These areas include nations with families from Roman, Slav, and eastern cultures.¹⁷

¹⁷ The College of Theology and Education offers well-structured programs in theology, missions, Christian education, and social work in Romanian, Russian, and Turkish. The professional staff is comprised of fifteen full-time professors and a number of other professors who work on a contract basis. Each member of the staff has graduated from institutions of higher learning in Romania, Russia, or the United States. Hence, students enrolled in the College of Theology and Education are provided solid, spiritual, academic, and practical education. The length of the programs in the college is eight semesters, which equals approximately four years of study. Seven of the semesters require full-time study, with the last semester being specifically designed for practical ministry. During the last semester, students are assigned to work in a local church with a pastor who serves as their mentor. During the final semester, students are required to return to the college for one week in order to assist in a course in practical theology. Other services offered by the college include a computer class, library, and reading hall. The kitchen provides students with two meals per day. In addition, the choir of the College of Theology and Education takes part in numerous

God gave this author the privilege of being part of a time of swift church growth in Eastern Europe. Jesus Savior Church was planted by about forty believers at the beginning of 1990. After the Soviet Union was dissolved, this church was the first Romanian Baptist church in Chisinau, Moldova.¹⁸ And since that time, the church baptized more than fifteen hundred people. This miraculous growth has inspired the author to study more on this topic.

As the Christian church enters into the twenty-first century, local churches are experiencing a time that is fascinating and challenging but also not easy. However, it is an important time, one with impressive opportunities for God's church to grow and advance. There are two major characteristics that face the church in these days. One of these characteristics is the reality of persecution. This persecution comes in many forms. In some countries, it is intolerance by a government that is anti-evangelical, pro-communist, or scientific, rationalistic, and permeated by New Age thinking. But in some so-called Christianized countries, the persecution takes a different form, that of creeping secularism and overt materialism. From the inside, Christianity is faced with dry rot. Christians are ignorant of the primary purpose of the

evangelical programs, sponsored by the Baptist Union of Moldova, throughout each semester.

¹⁸ Moldova is a landlocked nation slightly larger than the state of Maryland, bordered by Ukraine and Romania and with a history of foreign domination dating back to the fifteenth century. It was not called Moldova until 1940, being formerly considered part of Bessarabia. Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, Russia and Romania struggled for control of the territory. During the interwar period, Bessarabia was part of Romania; however, in 1939, the Soviet Union forcibly annexed Bessarabia from Romania, giving Moldova its present borders (solidified in 1945). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, an independent Moldovan state was established on August 27, 1991. Moldova has progressed unsteadily toward democracy since its independence following the Soviet collapse. The 2001 parliamentary elections reinstated communist rule, reducing expectation for reform. However, a weak industrial infrastructure and high foreign debt render Moldova economically vulnerable and highly dependent on imports from abroad.

church. When Christians get comfortable, the work of the church becomes self-centered and self-satisfying. The Christian movement becomes a club and an institution. The priorities become comfort and perpetuation of the institution.¹⁹

The second characteristic of this time is that it is a time of unprecedented growth for the church. There is no time in the history of Christianity when the movement has expanded as it has today, and in the ways it has expanded. This includes the proliferation of Christian radio, television, and films. It includes new churches planted, house churches, and the expansion of small-group ministries.

In Europe, there exists a great interest in church growth and renewal. In Russia and the independent countries that previously comprised the Soviet Union, there is unprecedented growth of Christian evangelical churches. For example, the fall of communism in Moldova has given rise to great church growth. Many of the new churches are led by pastors who have been Christians for five years or less, and many have never attended Bible college or seminary. Therefore, they need to be equipped and mentored. Because God wants his church to grow and advance, we need to be part of his plan, too. And the author's intent is that the importance of this work will be measured by the effect that it has already had — and will continue to have — upon him. There is no greater privilege than to see God's church grow and advance.

¹⁹ Hunter R. Kent, *Foundations for Church Growth* (Corunna, IN: Church Growth Center, 1984), 18-19.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CHURCH GROWTH

Recently, Bill Wellman, a member of Grace Chapel in Lexington, Massachusetts, asked why Islam is growing so fast. There might be different opinions, but in the author's opinion the results of the survey of pastors in Moldova gives an answer. According to the survey, Christians' indifference toward the world and unsaved people, along with passivity, is one of the main factors that hinder Christians in extending God's kingdom. It is important to remember and emphasize that God's church must grow. Church growth is not optional or elective. Church growth is a divine mandate: it must happen because of the church's Lord, because of its divine origin and destiny.

The urgency of church growth is heightened by the fact that churches all over the world face great opportunities from a responsive world. For that reason, today's supreme task is the effective multiplication of churches in receptive societies.²⁰ We could bring many arguments in support of church growth, but if we summarized them, we would find that church growth is mandated by the church's origin, nature, and purpose and because of the great need of the world.²¹

The Origin of the Church

Church growth is mandated first because the church has a divine origin that is found in Jesus. As the founder of the church, Jesus declared that his church will grow. Jesus came to this earth to found and build the church, the

²⁰ Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 41.

²¹ Hemphill, *The Antioch Effect*, 21.

called-out people who would be his body, his building, his bride, a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people whom God would possess (see 1 Pet 2:9). He said, “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matt 16:18). In Greek, the verb “to build” is *oikodomeo*, which also means “to promote growth.” In other words, Jesus will build his church, and he will promote the church’s growth. For that reason we can say that God designed his church to grow, he desires it to grow, and he empowers it to grow.

The Nature of the Church

Church growth is mandated also because of the church’s divine nature. The New Testament identifies different images of the church, images that help us better understand the church’s supernatural nature. The church is identified as the temple of God, the household of God, the body of Christ, the bride of Christ, and the people of God. All of these metaphors emphasize that the church is not a human organization or a building. It is much more than that. It is the living and spiritual body of Christ. Rick Warren argues that since the church is a living organism, it is natural for it to grow if it is healthy. The church is a body, not a business. It is an organism, not an organization. Therefore it is alive.²² And it will continue to advance and grow until the second coming of Christ.

²² Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 16.

The Purpose of the Church

Church growth is mandated also because of the church's divine purposes. These purposes are not established by human beings; rather, they have been established by the Lord Jesus. Therefore, the church's purposes are not negotiable; they are universal. One of the greatest passages in the New Testament that speaks about the church's purposes and growth is Acts 2:42-47:

They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

In this passage, we learn that the first community of believers followed various practices, and as a result of their ministry the Lord was producing and causing church growth. The practices of the church were not options; rather, these practices were elements and indicators of a healthy church. Warren comments that we should understand from Jesus' words in Matthew 16:18 that it is not our job to create the purposes of the church but to discover them in Scripture. Jesus Christ founded the church, loved and died for the church, and sent the Holy Spirit to the church. He will some day return for his church. As the owner of the church, Jesus has already established its purposes, and

those purposes are not negotiable.²³ Therefore, according God's purposes for his church, church growth is not negotiable.

The Need of the World

Church growth is mandated also because of the need of the world. The church is the unique, divine institution enabled by its Lord to bring to the world what it needs rather than what it wants. A short time ago, a family friend, who is the president of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in the Republic of Moldova, visited Jesus Savior Church on the occasion of his wife's baptism. Later, he said, "In my opinion, what you are doing as a church is great. I love your worship services, but at the same time, you Baptists are so inwardly focused that you as Christians don't have time for the world, those who are around you, even your friends and relatives. You try your best to protect your faith, but in my opinion you are weak in sharing that faith with others." There is a lot of truth in his saying. As Christians, we must not forget that we are the light and the salt of this world. The world desperately needs the message of hope that can be brought only by the church of God.

The revelation of God culminates by telling us that in Christ, God is a searching and saving God. But because humankind disobeyed God, the world is in darkness and is lost. However, Christians are "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may

²³ Ibid., 98. Our duty is to understand the purposes Christ has for the church and to implement them. While programs must change in every generation, the purposes never change. We may be innovative with the style of ministry, but we must never alter the substance of it.

declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pet 2:9). Donald A. McGavran says, “In this world, mission must be what God desires. It is not a man initiated activity but *mission Dei*, the mission of God, who himself remains in charge of it.”²⁴ “The Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost,” says Jesus (Luke 19:10). The Lord is longsuffering, Peter adds, “not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Pet 3:9).

God sent his only-begotten Son to fulfill his will and plan of salvation. And we find Jesus praying, “As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world” (John 17:18). God wants lost children found. His passion is to find those who are lost.²⁵

Also, the church of Christ is called by Its Lord to be salt and light in this world. Jesus said to his disciples, “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden” (Matt 5:14). By its nature, light will expand into the darkness; light cannot be hidden. Therefore, a healthy church will send light into the world by growing qualitatively and numerically. Ken Hemphill says, “If we are not interested in numerical growth, we are not interested in fulfilling the Great Commission, and we are not in harmony with the Word of God.”²⁶ Jesus said to his disciples, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in

²⁴ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 23.

²⁵ Ibid., 33-34. Several biblical images help us understand that God wants lost people found. In the New Testament, we find the shepherd who left ninety-nine sheep to find one that was lost. The Lord tells a parable about a woman who searches until she finds a lost coin. At the great banquet, the master said to his servant, “Bring the poor, the maimed, the blind, and the lame.” In this author’s view, there is no way for Christians to avoid a search for the lost.

²⁶ Hemphill, *The Antioch Effect*, 12.

the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28:18-19).

This is not a charge to individuals; it is a commission to the church. Only the church can teach all that Christ has commanded; only the church can equip believers to grow in maturity and to be the people of God in this world.

Therefore, concern for evangelism and church growth is an essential part of the Christian faith and an irreplaceable part of the work of the church.²⁷

Warren said, "If a church is not growing, it is dying."²⁸ Church growth is not an option for human beings; it is a divine work of the holy Trinity through human beings. As human beings, knowing our limits and our apparent lack of resources, we are tempted to think that our church can never grow as we wish. But Hemphill reminds us, "When you are tempted to think your church can't grow, when you doubt your ability as a leader, remember it was Paul's weakness that became the forum for the display of God's strength" (2 Cor 12:9-10).²⁹

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHURCH GROWTH

What come to our minds when we read the words "church growth"?³⁰

Do we think about strategies, programs, strong leaders, powerful preachers,

²⁷ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, v.

²⁸ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 16.

²⁹ Hemphill, *The Antioch Effect*, 26. When God uses what appears to be nothing to achieve something, it is certain he will receive the glory.

³⁰ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 98-99. McGavran distinguishes three kinds of church growth. Biological growth derives from those born into Christian families. This is a good method of growth because God commanded people to be fruitful and multiply. Christians should bring up their children in the fear and admonition of the Lord. Growth by transfer increases some congregations at the expense of others. And conversion growth is the way in which those outside the church come to rest their faith intelligently on Jesus Christ and are baptized and "added to the Lord" in his church.

large buildings, large groups of people, and a big budget? Probably we all agree that church growth is complex.³¹ Even if the words “church growth” are frequently used and common, among many Christians there still persists a lack of understanding and even a misunderstanding regarding this concept.

Christian A. Schwarz says that a look at church growth literature can be confusing, because there are many different approaches, and sometimes the concepts contradict one another.³² But for a better understanding of what church growth is, it is helpful to observe first several aspects of what church growth is not and then to find out what church growth is.

What Is Not Church Growth?

There are five misconceptions that relate to church growth.

First, healthy church growth is not a human program, although there is nothing wrong with programs. In fact, Scripture reveals that during the history of the church, God has used many good programs and plans to help people grow in faith. There have been excellent Sunday school programs, adult Bible study programs, VBS programs, summer camps, and many others. However,

³¹ C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1981), 29. Church growth cannot be reduced to a simple formula or canned program. See also Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 60-62. Warren states that church growth is seldom caused by just one factor. And he identifies a few basic facts about churches that grow. First, there is more than one way to grow a church. Some churches grow through their Sunday schools; others use small groups in homes. Some churches grow by using contemporary music; others grow by using traditional music. Some churches have an organized visitation program; others have never had one. Second, it takes all kinds of churches to reach all kinds of people. God loves variety. Diversity in style is strength, not weakness. God uses different approaches to reach different groups of people. The single thing that churches must have in common is the message. The message must never change, but the methods must change with each generation. And third, never criticize what God is blessing, even though it may be a style of ministry that makes you feel uncomfortable.

³² Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development* (Emmelsull, Germany: C & P Publishing, 2000), 15-17.

healthy church growth is not a program. Instead, is a set of principles, a divine process. Church growth is based on several New Testament principles of what God wants his church to be in the world. A church growth principle is a universal axiom which, when properly applied, results in significant qualitative and quantitative growth of the church. And these universal axioms or principles work in any culture.

Second, healthy church growth is not a numbers game. Church growth is much wider and deeper than adding names to church rolls. It delves into how persons become genuinely Christian and revolutionize and bless the cultures and nations in which God has placed them. Church growth arises from theology and biblical faithfulness.³³ The words “church growth” have a tendency to cause many leaders and people to think about numbers, but to limit the concern of church growth to numbers is unhealthy. It is true that part of the emphasis of church growth is on outreach and expansion. The Great Commission (Matt 28:19-20) is the Lord’s command to go and make disciples of all nations.

Every church has membership records. The book of Acts records the phenomenal growth of the New Testament church by quoting numbers: 11, 120, 3,000, 5,000 (Acts 1:15; 2:41-42; 4:4). When Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep, he too uses numbers. In one sense, numbers do not represent only numbers; they represent people. But the concern of healthy growth is not with numbers alone. The real concern of healthy church growth must be the saved people who are represented by those numbers. Interestingly, Dr. David

³³ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, vii.

Yonggi Cho, the pastor of the largest church in the world, wrote a book entitled *More Than Numbers*, in which he emphasizes the qualitative side of church growth and caring for God's people. He calls for a new reformation in the church that must begin with leaders. Relying on the teaching in Ezekiel 34 and Jeremiah 23, he shows how leaders of the church need to be responsible for the safe keeping of the sheep, care of the sheep, and feeding the sheep. He points out that Scripture underscores the importance of shepherds' concern for the needs of the people, not their own needs.³⁴ The ultimate goal of healthy church growth is not only that people come to faith and become church members. It is that they will continue to grow in discipleship. To be a mature disciple entails a lifelong process of growth and nurture around the Word.³⁵

Third, healthy church growth is not something new. When we begin to study church growth, it becomes evident that church growth traces back to New Testament times. And the biblical principles for church growth still apply to the church today.

Fourth, healthy church growth is not human-centered. From the outside, a growing, healthy church might seem to be centered on the pastor or a group of people, or around a strategy, a program, or a building. "It is not uncommon for pastors of growing churches to be accused of 'building their own empire.' However, church growth is not centered on individuals. Jesus Christ is the Living Lord of the church and the center of the healthy Church

³⁴ David Yonggi Cho with R. Whitney Manzano, *More Than Numbers* (Waco, TX: Word, 1984), 140.

³⁵ Kent, *Foundations for Church Growth*, 30.

growth.”³⁶ As John the Baptist said, “He must become greater; I must become less” (John 3:30).

Healthy church growth is not an easy work. Rather, it is a hard work. It is not the way to travel for those who are not prepared to pay the price. The price of church growth includes time, energy, risks, and money, and it always demands faith and trust.³⁷ Paul said, “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow” (1 Cor 3:6). In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul concludes that we are co-workers with God.

What Is Church Growth?

For a good understanding of the concept of church growth, it is necessary to survey the New Testament to observe several important aspects regarding growth. In the New Testament, the concept of growth appears in different contexts.

First, we find growth linked with the personality of Jesus. In Luke 2:40, we read, “And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him.” Luke also writes, “And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men” (2:52).

Second, we find growth linked with faith. The apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 10:15, “Neither do we go beyond our limits by boasting of the work done by others. Our hope is that, as your faith continues to grow, our

³⁶ Ibid., 31.

³⁷ Ibid., 32.

area of activity among you will greatly expand.”³⁸ In addition, we read in 2 Thessalonians 1:3, “We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing.”³⁹

Third, we find growth linked with love. In his prayer for the church at Philippi, Paul says, “And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God” (Phil 1:9-11).⁴⁰ Also, we read that Paul appreciated the church in Thessalonica, for its members grew in love (2 Thess 1:3).

Fourth, we find the concept of growth linked with the church. The apostle Paul says to Christians from Ephesus, “In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Eph 2:21-22). Then we read, ”From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Eph 4:16).

³⁸ In the Greek New Testament, the word for “increase” is *auxano*, which means to cause to grow, to become greater, or to grow. The verb may also refer to inward Christian growth.

³⁹ The Greek word is *huperauxano*, and the meaning of this term is to increase beyond measure or to grow exceedingly.

⁴⁰ The Greek verb *perisseu* means to be left over or more than enough; to increase, abound, overflow; to excel, exceed; have plenty, to have more than enough; to cause to increase or abound; to provide in abundance.

Fifth, we find the concept of growth linked to Christ's likeness. "We will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ" (Eph 4:15). And growing in Christ-likeness is a life process.

Sixth, we find the concept of growth linked with the Word of God. In the book of Acts we read, "But the word of God continued to increase and spread" (Acts 12:24). And Peter writes, "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation" (1 Pet 2:2).

Seventh, we find the concept of growth linked with grace and knowledge of Christ. "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen" (2 Pet 3:18).

And finally, we find God as the origin and source of church growth. In the book of Acts, the first Christians were "praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (2:47).⁴¹ The apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow" (1 Cor 3:6-9).

The main conclusion one can draw from these passages is that healthy church growth involves two main characteristics. First, in many New Testament passages, the term "growth" refers to qualitative growth. And second, there are verses in the New Testament where the term "growth"

⁴¹ The Greek word is *prostithemi*, and it means to put to; to add; to join to; give more; increase; proceed further.

refers to quantitative growth. Therefore, healthy church growth includes qualitative and quantitative growth.

Qualitative Church Growth

Explaining qualitative church growth, Warren writes that “quality” refers to the kind of disciples a church is producing.⁴² In other words, qualitative church growth refers to the spiritual level of the congregation. The New Testament emphasizes that God’s will for every Christian is to grow spiritually. Paul says, “Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ” (Eph 4:14-15). The ultimate goal of spiritual growth is to become like Jesus (Rom 8:29). In the early church, Christians were growing spiritually. In other words, we notice from the beginning their qualitative growth. In the book of Acts, Luke introduces several aspects regarding qualitative church growth:

- They continually devoted themselves to the apostles' doctrine, studying and receiving the Word of God (Acts 2:41-42).
- They loved each other and were so committed to one another that they willingly sold their property and shared with those in need

⁴² Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 50. Warren lists a few ways to measure the quality of a church: Are people being genuinely transformed into the likeness of Christ? Are believers grounded in the Word? Are they maturing in Christ? Are they using their talents in service and ministry? Are they sharing their faith regularly with others?

(Acts 2:42-45). In addition, the early church joyfully participated in a famine relief offering for the church in Jerusalem (Acts 11:29-30; 13:1-3).

- They served God and people by using their talents and gifts, and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles (Acts 2:43, 46).
- The early church had a profound impact on its society (Acts 16:16-18, 35-40).
- The first church praised and worshipped God “with glad and sincere hearts” (Acts 2:46-47).

Gene Getz presents three criteria for measuring maturity in the church:

“The maturity of the Body can be identified by the way church manifests faith, hope and love.”⁴³ A more exhaustive list would flow from the example of the first church.

Quantitative Church Growth

Quantity refers to the number of disciples and believers a church is producing. Quantitative or numerical growth has to do primarily with bringing more people into the kingdom of God. The first mention about numerical

⁴³ Getz, *Sharpening the Focus of the Church*, 53-82. Several passages from the epistles speak about these three criteria (1 Thess 1:2-3; 2 Thess 1:3-4; Col 1:3-5; Eph 1:15-18; 1 Tim 1:5; 1 Pet 1:20-22). A mature church is characterized by love (Col 1:17; 3:1, 12-14; Eph 4:14-16). Believers become mature Christians through three vital experiences. They need Bible teaching that will give them theological and spiritual stability, deep and satisfying relationships with each other and with Jesus Christ, and seeing people come to Jesus Christ as a result of corporate and individual witness to the non-Christian world (80).

growth of the church is found in Acts 2:47: “And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

In recounting the events at Pentecost, Luke wrote, “Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day” (Acts 2:41). He concluded that account by saying, “And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). Later he wrote, “More and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number” (Acts 5:14). The ministry of the deacons was born to meet the needs of the growing church. Notice what Luke wrote: “So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly” (Acts 6:7). In Acts 12:24, we read that “the word of God continued to increase and spread.”

From these verses we can understand the value of numerical growth for a local church. In fact, a healthy church fulfills its entire call when it grows numerically. By its quantitative growth, the kingdom of God grows, and this growth brings glory to the Lord of the church.

Discussing quantitative growth, McGavran says that a numerical approach is essential to understanding church growth. The church is made up of countable people, and there is nothing particularly spiritual in not counting them.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 93.

The Link Between Qualitative and Quantitative Church Growth

There are two misunderstandings about church growth. The first misunderstanding is that real church growth can be experienced only in a small church, with a small group of people. In the view of some people, numerical growth is a human preoccupation or a way of stealing sheep from other small churches. As an answer to those complaints a preacher said, “We don’t steal sheep, but we do plant grass!”⁴⁵ Commenting on this issue, Warren says, “Some churches excuse their lack of growth by insisting that the smaller a church is, the more quality it can maintain. This reasoning is faulty.”⁴⁶ He continues, “A church that has no interest at all in increasing its number of converts is, in essence, saying to the rest of the world, ‘You all can go to hell.’”⁴⁷

Other observers would argue that the unique sign of church growth is numerical growth. According to the New Testament perspective, quality and quantity are not in opposition to each other. In fact, Warren says that an exclusive focus on either quality or quantity will produce an unhealthy church.⁴⁸ How can we include and encompass numerical and maturational growth?

⁴⁵ Bob Russell, *When God Builds a Dynamic Church* (Monroe, La.: Howard Publishing, 2000), 9.

⁴⁶ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 52. If quality is inherent in smallness, then, logically, the highest-quality churches would consist of only one person. But one reason many churches remain small is because there is little quality in their life and ministry.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 52-53. As long as there are lost people in the world, we must care about quantity as well as quality.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 51. Warren says that quantity and quality are not mutually exclusive.

Because the church belongs to God, church growth, qualitatively and quantitatively, is the work of God.⁴⁹ We must remember this truth, because many times we find people tempted to judge a church, a small group of people, or a weak beginning by concluding that if there is no numerical growth, that church dies. However, George W. Peters brings a different perspective to this issue: “God doesn’t define success in the same terms we do. Although we rejoice over our numeral growth, we know that God doesn’t measure success in terms of attendance, offering, or the size of buildings. He measures effectiveness in terms of faithfulness to His World, in conformity to Jesus Christ, and ministry to those in need.”⁵⁰ He continues by saying that for many Christians, church growth has become almost synonymous with numerical increase and geographical expansion. Quantitative growth is one aspect of church growth, as the book of Acts clearly shows, as is geographical expansion.⁵¹

Warren says, “The fact that many pastors wish to ignore is this: Quality produces quantity.”⁵² Because the Christians from the first church were grounded in the Word of God and were committed to one another in unity and

⁴⁹ George W. Peters, *A Theology of Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1981), 59.

⁵⁰ Russell, *When God Builds a Dynamic Church*, 8.

⁵¹ Peters, *A Theology of Church Growth*, 22-23. We read in Acts of 120 believers (1:15), to whom 3,000 are added (2:41). Because this event took place in the temple and because of the manner of address used by the apostles (2:37), it is safe to surmise that the 3,000 were men, heads of that many families. This body soon became 5,000 men (4:4), to whom multitudes were added, men and women (5:14). The first part of Acts concludes with the statement that the word of God continued to grow (12:24). In Acts 21:20, James, summarizing the results of church growth, inform us that there were tens of thousands of believers in Jerusalem and the community. The same is true about the church in Palestine (13:48-49).

⁵² Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 51, emphasizes that churches full of genuinely changed people attract others.

fellowship, they praised God and found favor with all the people. As a result, the Lord added people to the church daily.

There are several implications when a church grows numerically. The experience of Jesus Savior Church, in Chisinau, Moldova, serves as an example. God blessed this church with a tremendous numerical growth. In the last seventeen years, this church has baptized more than two thousand people. And from the experiences of this church, one can see several implications of numerical growth:

- the sense of God's presence (1 Cor 14). When people come to accept Jesus during the worship services, this creates a new experience and assurance that the Holy Spirit works among us.
- a great opportunity to involve more people in the ministry of the Lord.⁵³
- a powerful impact on society. When a church grows numerically, there will be less darkness in this world.
- an example for other smaller churches. Many times brothers and sisters say that the growth of Jesus Savior Church is an example and challenge for their smaller church.
- glory to the Lord, who produces the qualitative and quantitative growth. Jesus said, "There is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:10).

⁵³ Ibid., 52. "It is also true that quantity creates quality in some areas of church life." For instance, the bigger a church is, the better its music becomes.

In conclusion, church growth is the work of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit by maturing Christians in Christ's likeness and by adding continually to the number of believers. A healthy, advancing church is not preoccupied with numerical growth but with praising God through its being and doing. And as a result, the Lord will cause spiritual and numerical growth in that church for his glory.

THE NATURE OF HEALTHY CHURCH GROWTH

Throughout church history, two extreme positions regarding church growth can be identified. One extreme is to assume that all responsibility for church growth belongs to humans. The other extreme is to abdicate all responsibility for growth. Warren identifies these views as "practical humanism" and "pious irresponsibility." Both are fatal for the church.⁵⁴

It is necessary to avoid the extreme that church growth is produced or caused by a good program, perfect management, a big budget, or strong orators. But we also have to avoid the extreme that there is nothing we can do for church growth. Some people believe that any planning, organizing, programs, ministries, or other human efforts are presumptuous, unspiritual, or even sinful. Our simple responsibility is to sit back and watch the church growth produced by God.

The New Testament reveals a God who has given to his church responsibility in accomplishing his will and plan of salvation. The New Testament emphasizes that we are God's ambassadors on this earth and are

⁵⁴ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 58-59.

called to represent him (1 Cor 5:17-20). The book of Acts constitutes the primary, most conclusive source about church growth and church advance. In that book, we find the story of the church in its beginning expansion from Jerusalem to Rome.⁵⁵ There also we read the first indications about church growth as a partnership between God and people:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

We also find that “the Word of the Lord spread through the whole region” (Acts 13:49) and “the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers” (Acts 16:5). These passages show that church growth involves a divine or supernatural factor; that is, church growth is the work of God. There is also a human or natural factor; that is, church growth is the result of the church’s work. In other words, church growth is produced by God, but only where people are faithful to their Lord. As Hemphill noted, “When the people

⁵⁵ Peters, *A Theology of Church Growth*, 15-16. The book of Acts furnishes us with the basic material from which we can deduce and define specific principles of growth. Acts is a showcase of a new religion. This religion began in Jerusalem, and its central message was about One who was crucified and raised, who ascended into heaven, and who sent the Holy Spirit from heaven. It was carried forward by a group of unlearned men of Galilee. A former zealous Pharisee named Saul, who was converted on the way to Damascus by a unique appearance of the Lord, became its great exponent and proponent and apostle to the non-Jewish world. The new religion overcame all barriers and leaped all boundaries to become a supranational, suprareacial movement and institution, the international church of Jesus Christ. Here is church growth as a divine-human movement.

of God fall deeply in love with him, he will empower them, enabling them to participate as he grows his church.”⁵⁶

Church Growth as the Work of God

Because the church is the church of God, church growth, qualitatively and quantitatively, is the work of God.⁵⁷ Many Christians, when they speak about church growth, are tempted to think about programs, strategies, and different tactics or techniques⁵⁸ that produce growth. But we need to understand that church growth cannot be produced by humans. Only God can breathe new life into a valley or dry bones.⁵⁹ Only God makes a church grow.

Many times we hear people that refer to a particular church by the name of the pastor. But Jesus taught that he is the founder,⁶⁰ the builder,⁶¹ and the owner⁶² of the church. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus said, “I will build my church.” Jesus called the universal church his church, and later the apostle Paul made it clear that this divine ownership could be applied to a particular local church.⁶³ And because Jesus is the founder, the builder, and the owner

⁵⁶ Hemphill, *The Antioch Effect*, 34.

⁵⁷ Peters, *A Theology of Church Growth*, 59. When Peters comments on Matthew 16:18, he emphasizes four components in this building program: Jesus is the foundation of the church; Jesus is the builder of the church; Satan is the enemy of the church; the church will endure and prevail.

⁵⁸ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 13-14. Many books try to manufacture the wave of God’s Spirit by using gimmicks, programs, or marketing techniques to create growth.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 14.

⁶⁰ Jesus is the foundation of the church: the rock, the foundation, and the chief cornerstone (Isa 28:16; cf. 1 Cor 3:11, Eph 2:20; 1 Pet 2:6-8).

⁶¹ Peters, *A Theology of Church Growth*, 60. In the words “I will build,” we learn that from the beginning of the church, our Lord emphasized that church growth is the work of God.

⁶² Because the church belongs to Christ, he will protect the church.

⁶³ Getz and Wall, *Effective Church Growth Strategies*, 5.

of the church, he must be given the credit for all true church growth.⁶⁴ Only God is worthy to be praised for church growth (Rom 11:36). About sixty years ago, Nikita Khrushchev, the leader of the Soviet Union, promised that he would show the world the last Bible of the last Christian on television. This man thought that he would be able to stop the church and destroy all the Bibles. But Jesus' promise is alive: "The gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matt 16:18).

In similar fashion, about eight years ago, a small Christian team came from Grace Chapel⁶⁵ to do evangelism in a village. It was a very hot summer, and it was not easy to do evangelism door to door. But we went to that village and began to witness about Jesus. In a few hours, an Orthodox priest, accompanied by a crowd of people from the village, came to chase us from the village. Finally the priest said, "In this village, there will never be a Baptist church." But today, by God's grace, in that village there is a Baptist church, the missionary who was sent by Jesus Savior Church was ordained later as the pastor of that church, and that congregation has a very nice building on the top hill of the village. That building testifies that the church of Christ will stand and will endure forever.

This truth is also proved by the apostle Mark, who writes at the end of his Gospel that the apostles "went out and preached everywhere, and the

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Grace Chapel Church in Lexington, Massachusetts, is a sister church of Jesus Savior Baptist Church in Chisinau, Moldova. These two churches have been in partnership for the last sixteen years.

Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it" (Mark 16:20).

This truth is further proved by the book of Acts. From the first pages of Acts we read that "the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47) and "a great number of people were brought to the Lord" (Acts 11:24).

This truth is also proved by the apostles Paul and Peter. Paul and Apollos both had a part in establishing the church in Corinth (1 Cor 3:5-10), and Paul called this church God's "building" and "God's temple" (1 Cor 3:9-16). He wrote that the source of all true church growth is God, and church growth is the work of God (1 Cor 3:6-7). He reminded the Corinthians that the church is God's cultivated field (1 Cor 3:9). We read in Colossians 2:19, "He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and joints, grows as God causes it to grow." Peter wrote, "You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood" (1 Pet 2:5).

From these verses we see that the Scripture is clear and insistent that God makes his church grow and advance. Indeed, church growth, qualitatively and quantitatively, is the work of God.⁶⁶ Walter C. Kaiser said,

⁶⁶ Peters, *A Theology of Church Growth*, 60. To accomplish the work through the church, the Father sent the Son into the world to become the Savior of the world (John 3:16-17). The Son came and in obedience gave his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). He reconciled the world to God by becoming the propitiation for the sins of the whole world (2 Cor 5:18-21; Phil 2:5-8; 1 John 2:1-2). Therefore, he was highly exalted and given a name above every name (Phil 2:9-11). And Jesus sent the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7).

"Church growth is the work of God. It comes from God; it cannot be imitated, or self-induced. Church growth is the gift of God's Love."⁶⁷

Therefore, the primary problem in churches is a spiritual one, not a methodological one. Church growth is not produced by a program, plan, or marketing strategy. A church's greatest need is not a clear understanding of its demographics but a clearer understanding of its God. Church growth is not something we do or produce in the church. Church growth is the by-product of a right relationship with the Lord of the church. Hemphill emphasizes that church growth is by definition a supernatural activity and thus is accomplished through the church by the Lord.⁶⁸ We must first realize that church growth is not something we do,⁶⁹ it is the by-product of a right relationship with Jesus, the Lord of the church.⁷⁰

Church Growth as People's Response to God's Will

The Bible clearly teaches that from the beginning, God was looking for men and women who would follow his will and hear his voice. He takes the initiative to look for these men and women. We read in Ezekiel 22:30, "I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none." In his Gospel, John presents the account of Jesus and the

⁶⁷ Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Revive Us Again* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 21.

⁶⁸ Hemphill, *The Antioch Effect*, 10.

⁶⁹ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 13-14. Warren writes that if there is a discussion about church growth, many people are tempted to think about programs, strategies, and tactics or techniques that produce growth. But church growth cannot be made by programs; only God makes a church grow.

⁷⁰ Hemphill, *The Antioch Effect*, 12-13.

Samaritan woman near the well. Jesus said, “Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks” (John 4:23). In the book of Acts, we find that God added to the church as a result of the believers’ life (Acts 2:41-47).

One of the main principles of church growth is the partnership between God and man. Warren writes that churches grow by the power of God through the skilled effort of people. Both elements, God’s power and people’s skilled effort, must be present. We cannot produce church growth without God, but he has decided not to do it without us.⁷¹

The apostle Paul illustrated a few truths in this partnership between God and people in 1 Corinthians 3:4-9:

For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not mere men? What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, God’s building.⁷²

In this passage Paul emphasizes several biblical truths about growth. First, church growth could not be made by separate individuals. Second, after people fulfill the responsibility given them by the Lord, God will reward each

⁷¹ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 60.

⁷² The New Testament is full of analogies of church growth that teach this principle: planting and cultivating God’s garden (1 Cor 3:5-9); building God’s building (1 Cor 3:10-13); harvesting God’s fields (Matt 9:37-38); growing Christ’s body (Rom 12:4-8; Eph 4:16).

according to his own labor. Third, only God makes things grow.⁷³ And therefore, when the church grows, all the glory belongs only to God; only he is worthy to be praised.⁷⁴ God's purpose is that we get the joy of service but he gets the glory.⁷⁵

In conclusion, we should note that growth is at once supernatural and natural. God designed his church to grow, he desires it to grow, and he has empowered it to grow. For these reasons, church growth is natural, but it is supernatural because only God can cause it.⁷⁶ Eugene Peterson argues also that growth, both biological and spiritual, is a mystery, intricate and complex, a work of the Holy Spirit. We must never assume we can manage or control it. If we try, we will be part of deformation rather than formation.⁷⁷ Thus, when we do see church growth, God receives the glory. Although people are privileged to join him in this activity, it is the result of his grace alone. We cannot engineer true growth; that is God's sovereign activity. The church cannot grow without God, but in his grace he has decided not to do it without us. And as Paul Borthwick says, "God works through us, but he also works before us and after us. For that reason, we can live expectant lives."⁷⁸

⁷³ Hemphill, *The Antioch Effect*, 24. The author argues that church growth is a supernatural activity in which God has graciously called and empowered us to join him. Our responsibility is to be responsive to God, prepared to join him, and willing to utilize the opportunities God gives us.

⁷⁴ John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 55.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 25.

⁷⁶ See also Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 59-60. Warren emphasizes that churches grow by the power of God though the skilled effort of people.

⁷⁷ Cited by Larry Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 125-26.

⁷⁸ Paul Borthwick, *Stop Witnessing and Start Loving* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2003), 136-46. The author says that as believers we can go in every day with a joyous anticipation and wonder, always asking God how is he going to be at work in and through our

THE METHODOLOGY

This thesis-project is not intended to be a comprehensive or a complete presentation on the topic of church growth, but it is important for a number of reasons.

First, this thesis is intended primarily to be a resource and a guide for pastors and Christians from Eastern Europe and Moldova who pray and want God's church to grow and advance. It is important that pastors and church leaders want the church they serve to grow and advance. But to pray for church growth is not enough. For church growth to happen there must be prayer for growth and trust that the church will grow. Then, these divine ingredients need to be accompanied by the initiation of a plan of action for growth, because faith without works is dead. In other words, in a growing church, pastors, leaders, and church members understand who they are, why they exist, and where they intend to go. Therefore, it is hoped that the results from this research project will be beneficial to other local churches, particularly for church leaders in Moldova.

Second, this thesis-project is intended to be used as academic material for the College of Theology and Education in Moldova. It will also be used as inspirational material at different pastors' conferences.

Third, this thesis is intended to challenge and encourage all believers and all those who are passionate about healthy church growth. The intent is that their prayers and efforts will help the kingdom of God to expand, that

lives. Borthwick speaks about several expectations: first, God uses our availability (Isa 6:8), our experiences (Matt 4:19), our prayers (Matt 9:36-38), our pain (2 Cor 1:4), and our faith; second, God can use our words; and finally, God is preparing people.

God's name will be glorified, and that more people will come to know Jesus as their Savior and Lord.

This thesis-project includes six chapters.

In chapter 1, which is an introduction, it is emphasized that church growth is not optional; it is mandated by the church's Lord, its divine identity, and its divine call. Therefore, church growth is an imminent work of God through human beings who are willing to surrender themselves to his will and call. Also, in this chapter it is mentioned that healthy church growth includes qualitative and quantitative growth. According to the New Testament, healthy church growth refers to the quality of spiritual life in the believers, as well as to the number of believers who are being added to the local church. This chapter also notes that according to the New Testament perspective, healthy church growth is first a divine initiative, and it is a supernatural work of God. But at the same time, healthy church growth involves and requires the effort of human beings. In other words, healthy church growth is produced by God when his people are faithful to him.

The purpose of the second chapter is to examine the theological and biblical foundation upon which this thesis is built. This chapter demonstrates the church's divine identity as the basic and foundational element for healthy church growth. Churches that grow in a healthy biblical manner are churches that understand who they are and what God says about his church. Therefore, this chapter focuses on understanding that the church's identity is a high imperative from the Lord of the church. This chapter provides the

authentic sources for discovering and understanding the church's identity. First, the church needs to know, understand, and accept what Jesus says about the church, and that any church apart from Jesus is not the church. Second, we can understand better the church's identity by studying the New Testament metaphors that are used to describe the church. These metaphors are crucial for an authentic understanding of the church's identity and call.

Chapter 3 is closely linked with chapter 2, because the church's identity determines the church's purposes. This chapter will continue to explore the New Testament metaphors about the church, because those metaphors help us to better understand the purposes of the church.

According to these metaphors, the church is called to authentic worship of God, authentic fellowship, authentic discipleship, authentic ministry, and authentic evangelism. Chapter 3 also contains a literature review about church growth.

Chapter 4 is preoccupied with the obstacles that hinder healthy church growth. These obstacles have been identified in the survey of more than 80 pastors from Moldova (see the appendix). This chapter contains an analysis of the survey, and the second part of the chapter explores the main obstacles to church growth. One goal of this chapter is to help churches to identify more clearly factors that hinder growth and overcome them.

Chapter 5 contains the findings and the results of biblical research, the literature review, and survey research. This chapter leads toward a practical vision for healthy church growth in Eastern Europe and especially in Moldova.

This chapter applies all of the research to church ministers in Moldova and to the College of Theology and Education.

Chapter 6 presents conclusions and generalizations about the research. This chapter concludes by emphasizing that the primary duty of a local church is to discover and understand its divine identity. The church's identity or being will determine the church's call or doing. And while the world's principles and contexts may change in every generation or culture, the church's identity and purposes never change. The owner of the church, Jesus Christ, who is the head and Lord of the church, has already established the church's being and call, neither of which is negotiable or changeable.

Growing churches understand who they are and where they want to go, and then they discover a strategy for how to get there. Growing churches understand that their main task and responsibility is to be what God wants them to be, to do what God wants them to do, in the ways that God leads them to do, from him and through him and for his glory.

Chapter 2

THE BIBLICAL IDENTITY OF A HEALTHY, GROWING CHURCH

INTRODUCTION

Identity is never simply a creation. It is always a discovery. True identity is always a gift of God.

—David G. Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself*

In the previous chapter, we saw that church growth is not optional. It is mandated by the church's divine origin and nature and by the need of the world. Therefore, healthy, growing churches understand that church growth is not elective or optional. So, knowing and understanding that church growth is a mandate, perhaps the imminent question that arises is, What we must do? This is one of the most frequent questions regarding church growth.

According to the research in this project, the most important question regarding church growth is not what we must do; rather, it is, What we must be? In other words, the primary focus of this chapter is about the church's being, because the identity of a church is the foundational principle that determines a church's call and, implicitly, healthy church growth.

Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to examine the biblical and theological foundation upon which this thesis is built. In this chapter, we will examine what the Bible says about church identity. Is there a clear definition of or indicators toward church identity? How does church determine its identity or being, and how does its identity influence a church's purposes and growth? This chapter is designated to discuss these and other similar

questions through an examination of specific biblical texts and metaphors that are linked with the church's identity and call.

Healthy, growing churches have a clear-cut identity.¹ And as Charles Colson said, "When the church is the church, evil cannot stand against it."² The world of the twenty-first century is confronted with one of the greatest crises in history. People do not know who they are, where to go, or how to get there. Day by day, people are confronted with a relativistic way of thinking. People are losing the value and the identity that was given by God. This relativistic approach affects not only the world but also the church.

Looking back into church history, we can identify different periods when the church's identity and call were affected and influenced in many ways by the philosophy and the politic of that time. But in every generation and in every historical context, the church is called by its Lord to have a clear-cut identity and purposes. This call becomes a challenge for every local church.

Therefore, one of the greatest challenges for the church of Christ is to rediscover and maintain the identity that was given by the founder, builder, and head of the church, Jesus Christ. The understanding of the church's identity is a high imperative from the Lord of the church. Only those churches that live in this world according to their being or identity will experience spiritual and numerical growth, and those churches will enlarge God's kingdom.

¹ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 82.

² Charles Colson, *The Body Being Light in Darkness* (Waco, TX: Word, 1992), 63.

In Matthew 16:18, Jesus said, “I will build my church.” From these words we should understand that it is not our job to create the identity of the church but rather to discover it in Scripture. It is Christ’s church, not ours. Jesus Christ founded the church, he loved and died for the church, and he sent the Holy Spirit to the church and will someday return for his church. As the owner of the church, Jesus has already established its purposes, and those purposes are not negotiable.³

According to the New Testament, the church⁴ of Jesus Christ is the “pillar” and the “bulwark” of God’s truth. Paul wrote to Timothy, “If I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God’s household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15). But, says Gilbert Bilezikian, history shows that the church has often acted as the enemy and the betrayer of God’s revealed truth. In the present day, there is a clamor for the church to rediscover its identity.⁵

In Eastern Europe and in Moldova, there is much misunderstanding and confusion regarding the church. For many people, the church is a building, or a religion. For others, the church is perceived as a place for

³ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 98. Our duty is to understand the purposes Christ has for the church and to implement them.

⁴ George W. Peters, *A Theology of Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1981), 48. The church of Jesus Christ is a divine creation (Eph 2:10). It finds its source in the eternal counsel of God (Eph 1:4; 3:11). Its origin, design, composition, mission, purpose, vitality, and destiny are an expression of the love, wisdom, grace, power, and pleasure of God (Eph 1:3-4). The church is God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus (Eph 2:10). It is the church of God, the household of God, the priesthood of God, the body of Christ, the bride of Christ, and the temple of God indwelled by the Holy Spirit.

⁵ Gilbert Bilezikian, *Community 101* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 11. The author says also that the church has lost its biblical definition as divinely designed community.

Christian programs, weddings, and funerals. And because of secularization, for many people the church's being is reduced simply to a human organization. Colson argues that these kinds of perceptions are only a symptom of a much broader problem: a genuine identity crisis. Thus it is no surprise that nonbelievers do not know much about the church's identity or mission.⁶

THE BIBLICAL CHURCH'S IDENTITY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The identity of the church originates in God. From the beginning of the Bible, we see God's explicit revelation regarding his identity. He intended that his creation also would have a clear identity. And when God was going to create man, God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen 1:26-27).

The Old Testament illustrates that God expected his chosen people to have and keep its divine identity. On many occasions God reminded Israel, "You are the children of the Lord your God. Do not cut yourselves or shave the front of your heads for the dead, for you are a people holy to the Lord your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the Lord has chosen you to be his treasured possession" (Deut 14:1-2).

⁶ Colson, *The Body Being Light in Darkness*, 30.

In the New Testament, we find Jesus speaking about his followers' identity: "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden" (Matt 5:13-14). Later he told his disciples, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). And "you are my friends if you do what I command" (John 15:14).

The New Testament also presents the identity that believers have as Christ's followers; in him we are chosen from the world (John 15:19), we are his witnesses (Acts 10:39), we are saved (Acts 15:11), and we are God's offspring (Acts 17:29). Paul wrote that we are God's children (Rom 8:16), and if we are children, then we are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ (Rom 8:17). As saved people in Christ, we are many limbs of one body (Rom 12:5; Eph 4:25; 5:30); we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing (2 Cor 2:15); we are the servants of God (2 Cor 6:4); we are God's workmanship (Eph 2:10). Paul repeated the words of Jesus to the Thessalonians, "You are all sons of the light and sons of the day" (1 Thess 5:5). Peter wrote, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pet 2:9). And John wanted believers to understand "how great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that

is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him” (1 John 3:1).

The church’s preoccupation is to understand what it is to be and then what it is to do. In other words, first we must understand the church’s identity given by God; that identity will determine the church’s purposes. Today, in all churches there is a tension between doing and being.⁷ And it seems that most of our energy and church strategies, even our messages and meetings, are focused more on doing and less on being. Eugene Peterson says, “We run all over town, from committee to committee, conference to conference, organization to organization, doing all manner of good works, scattering seed in everybody’s field but our own.”⁸

But a church is healthy when its identity corresponds with its original identity, which was determined by its Lord Jesus. The members of such a church know who they are and why they exist. And in a healthy, growing church, the doing of the church flows from the being of that church.

THE DANGERS OF COMPROMISING THE CHURCH’S IDENTITY

In discussion with people who do not attend a church and even with church members, it became evident that in Moldova there is a church identity crisis. One of the simplest ways of describing this identity crisis is to say there

⁷ Stephen A. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 62. He emphasizes that the tension between being and doing in the church is real. It is God’s priority to understand our being, for it is there we discover what we have to do. Doing for Christ means that out of the inner core of one’s being in him, a person walks, talks, serves, loves, and lives for him.

⁸ Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 137.

is confusion in people's minds, a lack of understanding of what is really the church; in other words, there is confusion about what is the church's being. And this church identity crisis has deep implications not only for churches and Christians but also for every aspect of life.

A general view of church history shows that in every generation, the church and Christianity have passed through an identity crisis. In the second through the fourth centuries, the church was characterized by a crisis of identity on the doctrinal level. The first councils—the Council of Nicea (325), the First Council of Constantinople (381), and the Council of Chalcedon (451)—were convened to deal with those crises.

In the sixth through the tenth centuries, the church was confronted with two major problems. First, the church was in danger of losing its identity by being assimilated by the state. And because of that crisis, the church became more a state institution than a living body of Christ. Forms, traditions, and human rules became later absolutes for many churches. At the First Council of Constantinople, Theodosius declared Christianity to be the official state religion. The Second Council of Constantinople (553) was convened by Justinian I, who wanted to force every nation to become Christian. And as a result, the church faced a dark spiritual time.

In 1517, the identity crisis came through Luther's reforms, when the church was challenged to turn back to its original divine identity and call. And during that time, the church turned back to the biblical paradigm of mission; the preaching of the gospel became the heart of the church's mission.

Toward the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth century, Europe was confronted with a new philosophy, liberalism. In this context, the human factor begins to take precedence over the divine factor. The Bible was considered to be a book that was no longer relevant. The concept of the transcendent was neglected, and the divine factor was considered to be an invention of the human mind. This philosophy generated a liberal approach to the Word of God and theology. At the same time, this approach influenced the church's identity.

The twenty-first century is marked by a postmodernism liberal philosophy that tends to abandon many historical principles. The single principle that is accepted is relativism. And step by step this philosophy penetrates religious spheres, even the church. In a context of materialism, individualism, and secularism, this generation becomes confused and lacks a clear understanding of what the church is. More and more people do not know what the church is or the reason for its existence. When the church loses sight of its identity, several results follow.

Copying Methods and Strategies of the Secular World

When a church begins to compromise its divine identity, it inevitably will begin to copy and depend on secular methods and strategies. However, the apostle Paul wrote to Christians in Rome, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing

and perfect will" (Rom 12:2). For a church to be healthy and experience growth, knowing and understanding God's will are essential.

Growing churches are in a continuous process of discerning God's will for that specific church. However, when a church loses its identity, its worship, fellowship, discipleship, evangelism, and ministry will be affected in a deep manner. When a church loses its God's given-identity, it looks for human methods and resources to restore its identity instead of turning back to its original call of being a temple of God, a body of Christ, a people of God, and a bride of Christ.

In *Discerning God's Will Together*, Danny Morris and Charles Olsen emphasizes that without thinking, the church borrows many things from the surrounding culture. It tends to use leadership and management theory for the purpose of organizing and administering the church.⁹ Human programs may be good vehicles of ministry. But if we depend upon human methods to grow a church, we run the risk of making an idol of church growth methodology. Healthy church growth comes as a result of God's work in a church. When church growth comes through the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit, then the glory will always go to Christ, not to the person or the method. We see from Scripture that God is not a God of confusion. He works through human beings and uses strategy and good organization and

⁹ Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1997), 53. The authors write, "The church us vulnerable. We are apt to turn organizational tools into work; we think that if we are good enough and smart enough and careful enough, we can maneuver our way into a new future. Some theological homework would have suggested to the church that it does create its own future; it anticipates it as a gift from God."

structure,¹⁰ so we need to learn effective principles and methods with which God has blessed us in growing churches.

Losing Its Testimony in the World

When a church begins to compromise its divine identity, it inevitably loses its divine power and testimony. Once, Jesus asked his disciples, “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men” (Matt 5:13). And when a church loses its testimony, it loses its distinctive nature and call. On another occasion, when Jesus was praying for his followers, he said, “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world” (John 17:15-19). In other words, God designed his church to be in the world, but it must be distinct from the world. It is true that God’s church is in the world, but the world’s nature must not be in the church. When churches become like the world, then those churches cease to be what God intended them to be.

¹⁰ Gene A. Getz, *Sharpening the Focus of the Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), 83. Note that structures must help us to become a mature body of believers and not cause us to violate the biblical principles just outlined. Above all, structures must never be allowed to become absolute or an end in themselves. See also Ken Hemphill, *The Antioch Effect* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 17.

Preventing Growth

When a church begins to compromise its divine identity, that compromise inevitably will hinder and prevent the church from growing and being healthy. Jesus said, “I am the vine, you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). These words are pertinent to our generation, for when a church loses its God-given identity, it loses its relationship with the Lord of the church and God’s power to change the world. Therefore, when a church loses its God-given identity, it will stop growing and advancing God’s kingdom.

THE BIBLICAL APPROACH TO THE CHURCH’S IDENTITY

Peterson said, “We become what we are called to be.”¹¹ And what we do flows from who we are.¹² However, in many churches only the pastors and the deacons know why the church exists and what it has to do. But in a healthy, growing church each member knows those two things. Sometimes we observe a deep gap between what the pastor expects from the church and the expectations of the church members.

What is the church? There are many definitions of the church. But what is the biblical description of the church? How do we express its identity and fulfill Christ’s desire for it? One way to describe the church to look at the definition Jesus gave to the church.¹³ Another way to describe the church is to

¹¹ Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, 74.

¹² Colson, *The Body Being Light and Darkness*, 281.

¹³ Leon Morris, *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 141-42 (see Matt 16:16-19). This was not a human discovery, but it came by revelation. The play on

analyze the New Testament metaphors about the church. Darrell Robinson said, “Our world has all but forgotten what church is all about. . . . It is the time for the church to return to the principles of the New Testament. Let the church be the church with a vision from God for its mission.”¹⁴

The Temple of God, Called for Worship

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit . . . ? . . . You were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.
—1 Corinthians 6:19-20

The imagery of the church as the temple of God is frequently used in the New Testament. And usually the analogy of the “temple of God” refers to a worshiping community or worship. According to the New Testament, the church as a people is now God’s new temple, and all believers are his priests. The language of the ceremonies in the temple was applied to the redemptive work of Christ (Heb 9:11-14), and the life of salvation is based on him (Heb 10:19-25). Cleansed by the blood of Jesus (Heb 10:14, 19), Christians can enter the true, heavenly sanctuary, where Jesus ministers as high priest (Heb 8:1-2; 9:11, 24). Christianity rejected worship that was restricted to a particular holy place (John 4:21-24) or to holy days and seasons (Col 2:16),

words and address to Peter make it clear that apostle is assigned a special place. Roman Catholics have traditionally thought that Jesus appointed Peter as the head of the church, that he passed on his position to his successors at Rome, and that all persons outside this communion cannot claim to be members of the true church. However, Jesus did not say that he would build on Peter (*petros*) but on the rock (*petra*), and the small difference in the two words is important. It is possible to understand the Greek to mean that the rock is not so much the man as the confession he has just made. It is on the basis of confessing Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, that the church is to be built.

¹⁴ Darrell W. Robinson, *Total Church Life* (Nashville: Broadman, 1990), 11. “The greatest need in our time is not economic, social, political, or ecological. The greatest need of our generation is for the church to be the church.”

spoke only of the believing community as priestly with no provision made for a special priesthood (1 Pet 2:5, 9), and reinterpreted the language of sacrifice to apply to a life dedicated to God (Rom 12:1). The temple was community. The New Testament put no emphasis on the place of worship, because wherever the community gathered was the place of worship.¹⁵

The church is identified now as the temple of the Holy Spirit.¹⁶ Early in his ministry, Jesus predicted that he would rebuild the temple as his body through his death and resurrection (John 2:19-22). This body of Christ is God's sacred temple, his people within whom his Spirit lives (1 Cor 3:16-17; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:21-22). Through Jesus, God comes and dwells in those who keep his word (John 14:23). Thus the community and not the physical structure becomes the temple, for God lives in the people, not in a building (1 Cor 3:16; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:19-22).¹⁷

The imagery of the temple is frequently applied to the church. Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple" (1 Cor 3:16-17).

¹⁵ J. J. von Allmen, *Worship* (London: Lutterworth, 1965), 242-43.

¹⁶ Millard J. Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine*, ed. L. Arnold Hustad (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992), 332-34. The Spirit brought the church into being. Dwelling within the church, the Holy Spirit imparts life to it. The "fruit of the Spirit" is indicative of the activity of the Holy Spirit and thus, in a sense, of the genuineness of the church. It is the Holy Spirit who conveys to the church (Acts 1:8). Also, we find in the New Testament that the Spirit produces unity in the church (Acts 4:32). The Holy Spirit, dwelling within the church, creates a sensitivity to the Lord's leading (Matt 28:20; John 14:18, 23). Indwelling by the Spirit also mean that Jesus is present spiritually with us (Rom 8:9-10). Finally, the Holy Spirit makes the church holy and pure.

¹⁷ Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 220.

Gilbert Bilezikian reiterates that God's people are the spiritual house where God's Spirit lives, and they are the priests who serve God. Like the ancient priests, their task is to offer "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God" (1 Pet 2:5) rather than the animals that were sacrificed in Old Testament times.¹⁸

The sacrifices that God expects from his church are of two kinds. First, God desires us to worship him with all our being. "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship" (Rom 12:1). Just as the temple was a sacred place under the old covenant because God dwelled in it, so also are believers sanctified under the new covenant because they are the temple of the Holy Spirit of God. 'Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body' (1 Cor 6:19).

Second, God wants us to sacrifice our possessions, too. The book of Hebrews says, "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased" (Heb 3:15-16). In other words, authentic worship is not limited only to words or to "the fruit of lips." Authentic worship that pleases God also involves material activities and sacrifices.

In conclusion, the passages that speak about the church as the temple emphasize that it is God's. The church as the temple is connected with the

¹⁸ Bilezikian, *Community 101*, 70.

presence of God (2 Cor 6:16-18), of Christ (Matt 18:20), and of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16). God dwells in the temple, and his presence makes it holy. Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of this new temple. Individuals in the church are living stones in whom the divine presence dwells, and so they must conduct themselves accordingly. The church as the temple is where believers experience the presence of God, bring worship and glory to him, and are transformed by God's grace.

The Household of God, Called for Fellowship

You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household.

—Ephesians 2:19

Another significant analogy used by the New Testament regarding the church is the analogy of God's household¹⁹. And this analogy refers primarily to God's definition of Christian fellowship. The apostle Paul reminded the church Ephesus that there was a time they were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now, in Christ Jesus, they who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ (Eph 2:11-18). And in Ephesians 2:19-22, Paul explained that because of Christ's atoning work, "You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the

¹⁹ The Greek word for *household* is *oikeios*, which means more than a building. This word means to belong to a house or family, all the persons forming one family, intimate, belonging to one's household, related by blood, or the family of God.

foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.” Commenting to the church, Rick Warren says that “a Christian without a church family is an orphan.”²⁰

The Bible says that God created man in his image and in his likeness (Gen 1:26). And one of the qualities that God has implemented in human character is the necessity of being in fellowship. “The LORD God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him’” (Gen 2:18). Since that day, everywhere there are signs that people hunger for community, fellowship, love, and a sense of family. God does not want his children to grow up in isolation from one another, so he created a spiritual family on earth.

The New Testament refers to the church as “God’s household which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15). The apostle Peter wrote that “it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?” (1 Pet 4:17). Paul reminded the believers in Galatia that they shared a common faith (Gal 6:10).

In *The Church of Christ*, Everett Ferguson comments that according to this family imagery, God is the Father over his house; indeed, he is the source and pattern of human fatherhood (Eph 3:14-15). Although there is a

²⁰ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 314.

sense in which God is “Father of all” (Eph 4:6; cf. Acts 17:28), the usual biblical language speaks of him as Father in relation to his spiritual children (John 1:12-13; 1 John 2:29; 3:9, 4:7; 5:1-8, 1 Cor 4:15). His children have access to him as Father in prayer (Matt 6:6-9; Rom 8:15). To them he gives his love (1 John 3:1), fatherly provision (Matt 7:7-11), and fatherly discipline (Heb 12:4-11).²¹

Jesus Christ declared that his true family was not his mother and brothers according to the flesh, but “whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matt 12:46-50). Ferguson says that this is an important declaration and description. Just as human children have the nature of their parents and tend to imitate them, so God’s spiritual children seek “to do the will of [the] Father in heaven,” thus expressing his nature²² (1 John 2:29; 3:2; 5:1-18) and imitating his love (Eph 5:1-2).

For those who must give up their earthly family in order to follow Jesus or to proclaim the gospel, he promises that in this life they will receive a hundredfold “brothers, sisters, mothers, children” (Mark 10:29-30). These people are brothers and sisters in the family of God because they possess the same Spirit of God (Rom 8:14-16; Gal 4:5-7).

Jesus Christ became like us in every respect (Heb 2:17) so that we might become like him. He took on our nature of flesh and blood (Heb 2:14)

²¹ Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*, 114-21, argues that by sharing in Jesus’ life and status, Christians are privileged to address God in the same way as Jesus did, as “Abba, Father” (Mark 14:36; Rom 8:15). As the children of God, we are “heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ” (Rom 8:15-17). The child of God is an heir of God (Gal 4:5-7) because of identification with God’s Son (1 Cor 1:9). Christians possess this inheritance because of their incorporation into Christ.

²² Ibid., 118-19.

and underwent our suffering (Heb 2:10, 18). Through his suffering and death, he destroyed the power of death and made atonement for the sins of people (Heb 2:10-17). Through his humanity, he calls his people brothers and sisters. The sanctifier and the sanctified have the same Father (Heb 2:11). Therefore, Jesus identifies his people as being of the same family, his brothers and sisters (Heb 2:11).²³

Paul wrote to Christians in Rome, “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love” (Rom 12:10). The Greek word *philadelphia* (brotherly love) describes a special relationship that is characteristic of a family. Applying the term to the church, Paul was referring to the love that believers in Christ should have for one another. The word *adelphos* (brother), which is related to the word *philadelphia*, was used more than two hundred times by the New Testament writers to refer to other Christians. And when this family term is applied to believers, it means “fellow believers,” “members of God’s family,” “brothers and sisters in Christ,” “members of God’s household” (Eph 2:19). It means we have all been born again into God’s eternal family. Thus we are vitally related to each other through a common heritage.²⁴ God has “adopted [us] as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will” (Eph 1:5). “Brothers” and “sisters” became common designations for the Christian community. The term identified a sense of family solidarity among those not related by blood.²⁵

²³ Ibid., 119-20.

²⁴ Gene Getz and Joe Wall, *Effective Church Growth Strategies* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 61-62.

²⁵ Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*, 119.

God's family, as he designed it to function, helps us appreciate what a healthy church should be. This metaphor adds a dimension of warmth, tenderness, concern, and loyalty—in short, human emotion and devotion.²⁶ In *Effective Church Growth Strategies*, Gene Getz and Joe Walls write:

God designed the church, the family of God, to be a "reparenting organism" to bring emotional and spiritual healing to people who have grown up in unhealthy families. Many people today need to learn for the first time how to love and care for others. They may have never experienced this kind of environment before. When the church functions as God says it should, these believers see it modeled in their new, extended family.²⁷

In other words, God intended through the church to make us a part of his family (1 John 3:1). And as members of his family, we must love one another (Rom 12:10), honor one another (Rom 12:10), be of the same mind with one another (Rom 15:5), accept one another (Rom 15:7), admonish or instruct one another (Rom 15:4), and greet one another (Rom 16:3-6, 16).

We must practice those things because "you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Gal 3:26-27). Also, the church is God's visible community and family through which we can test and express our true love toward God. We read in 1 John 4:20-21, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother."

²⁶ Getz and Wall, *Effective Church Growth Strategies*, 62. By using this metaphor, Paul was illustrating the emotional aspects of relational Christianity.

²⁷ Ibid.

The Church as the Bride of Christ, Called for Discipleship

Then Jesus came to them and said, “. . . go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you . . . ”

—Matthew 28:18-20

Another profound analogy used by the New Testament referring to the church is the analogy of the bride of Christ. This analogy involves the idea of preparing, cleaning, equipping, and growing in holiness. In other words, this analogy leads us to another of the church's calls, discipleship. The ultimate goal of discipleship is to teach and equip saints to be Christ-like and to prepare them to meet Christ. One of the most explicit passages that speaks about this analogy is written by the apostle Paul:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing of water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without wrinkle or stain or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. (Eph 5:20-32)

Several implications follow from this analogy.

The Indissoluble Union Between the Lord and His Church

Jesus Christ emphasized powerfully the importance of this indissoluble union. He said to his disciples, “Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No

branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:4-5). Then, "if you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you" (John 15:7). In other words, first, Christ is the object and instrument of the unity; second, the church cannot grow and bear fruit unless it remains in Christ, because apart from Christ the church does not exist; and third, this unity results in many blessings: "ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you."

Paul's analogy of the relationship between husband and wife emphasizes the indissoluble union between the church and Christ. And this union was possible only by and through his grace. In Ephesians 1:7 Paul says, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace." Therefore, "praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ" (Eph 1:3). And in Ephesians 4:16 Paul points out that church growth occurs only because of this union between Christ and the church: "From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."

The Exalted Position of the Church

Paul says, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph 5:25). This picture shows how much Christ loves the church. This exalted position is not because of what the church has done for Christ but because of what Christ has done for the church. The apostle John wrote, “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10), and “we love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). Therefore, “since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11).

In Christ we have been justified through faith; we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom 5:1). Through Christ we were reconciled with God (Rom 5:10); in Christ we are God’s children (Rom 8:16). If “we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory” (Rom 8:17).

In 2 Corinthians 11:2, Paul writes, “I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him.” The church of Christ, having become married to Christ, has the right to take the name of the husband. And the children who result from this union have the right to take the name of the husband. The children formed in this union have become beneficiaries of the Son of God and are members of the body (Eph. 5:20). It is the highest privilege of

believers to become and to be members of the body of Christ. It is a great honor to be a part of the beautiful bride of Christ.

The Church Accepts the Lordship of Christ

The New Testament teaches clearly that Christ will build the church (Matt 16:18). “Being in very nature God, he did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,²⁸ to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:6-11).

Therefore, the bride of Jesus Christ is the bride of Jesus Christ only. Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians, “You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord’s Table and the table of demons” (1 Cor 10:21). Later he wrote, “What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: ‘I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.’ ‘Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing,

²⁸ In Greek, the term *kurios* means one to whom a person or thing belongs, about which he has power of deciding; master, lord; the possessor and disposer of a thing, the owner; one who has control of a person, the master; in the state, the sovereign, prince, chief, the Roman emperor; a title of honor expressive of respect and reverence with which servants salute their master.

and I will receive you.' 'I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, said the Lord Almighty'" (2 Cor 6:16-18).

From this reason Paul reminded the Corinthians, "I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him" (2 Cor 11:2). The love and authority of Christ and the submission and response of the church are exemplified in this relationship. Christ's headship is not an arbitrary authority but an authority based on love.

During church history, some people tried to deny Christ's lordship: "For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord" (Jude 4). But the apostle Peter challenges every Christian: "in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Pet 3:15).

A Pure Life

The church, as the bride of Christ, must be pure and remain beautiful until its Lord returns. In Ephesians 5:25-27, Paul says that Jesus sanctifies and cleanses the church to be holy and without blemish. In the Revelation, John informs his readers that he saw those who had washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. The bride, the Lamb's wife, is

beautifully described in Revelation 21, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. The bride of Christ, the church, must be kept beautiful. The church must maintain proper priorities (Matt 6:33) and practice the highest moral standards (Jas 4:4).

According to Ephesians 5:26, the church is now undergoing a process of sanctification. The word *sanctification* means to be set apart. So the church is now being set apart for Christ, in order that eventually it will be presented a pure virgin to Christ (2 Cor 11:2). Furthermore, Ephesians 5:26 points out that the church is being cleansed by this means of sanctification. The means of sanctification is by the washing of water with the Word. It is not by water baptism, but by the water of the Word of God. As the church becomes more and more conformed to what the Word of God teaches, it becomes more and more that virgin to be presented to him.

Ephesians 5:27 gives the purpose for the process of sanctification: to present the church as a glorious church. This is another way of saying what Paul said in 2 Corinthians 11:2, that the intent is to present the church as a pure virgin to Christ. Here it is put in terms of being presented as a glorious church.

Expecting Its Lord

Two main passages speak about the church preparing for and expecting its Lord (Eph 5:20-28; 2 Cor 11:2). In both passages, Paul portrays the church as a bride betrothed to Christ. The universal church, comprising the saved from Pentecost to the *parousia*, is the bride of Christ whose

marriage to him will be consummated at his return. Even now, the bride, the church, is in the process of being perfected for the Groom.

According to 1 Corinthians 15:50-58, the church indeed will be glorified. There will be a ceremony in heaven, as Revelation 19:6-8 describes: "Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: 'Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.' (Fine linen stand for the righteous acts of the saints.)"

This is the final destiny of the church. But until that day, Peter reminds believers,

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.

Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. (2 Pet 3:9-12)

The church today is not without fault, but when Jesus comes again, he will present his church to himself in radiant glory, like a bride to her husband.²⁹ But until that day, "the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let

²⁹ J. Clyde Turner, *The New Testament Doctrine of the Church* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1951), 35.

him who hears say, ‘Come!’ Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life” (Rev 22:17). Therefore, “let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready” (Rev 19:7), because “blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!” And he added, ‘These are the true words of God” (Rev 19:9).

The Body of Christ, Called for Ministry

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

—1 Corinthians 12:27

From [Christ] the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

—Ephesians 4:16

The apostle Paul used different metaphors to describe the church, but one of the most extended images of the church is that of the body of Christ. The analogy for the church as the body of Christ involves the idea of work and ministry. The New Testament uses the Greek word *soma* (body) more than thirty times. And one of the main points of this analogy is that each member of the body is called out to serve. The apostle Paul instructs the church at Rome, “Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Rom 12:4-

5). Also, this analogy includes several significant aspects that are linked with the church's healthy growth.

Jesus Christ Is the Head of the Body

God is the head of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 11:3), and Christ is the head of the church (Eph 1:22; Col 1:18; 2:19; Eph 5:23) and of every husband (1 Cor 11:3). The New Testament also teaches that Jesus Christ is the head of all the universe (*hyper panta*; Eph 1:22; Rom 11:36; Col 1:16; 2:19). The church is the body of Christ, and he is the head of the body (Eph 4:15). This is an inseparable relationship. In this unity, Christ is the head, and he leads and provides the growth of the body. He is not only the course of the body's existence (1 Cor 10:16) but also the fulfillment of its life (Eph 4:15).

Christians, as members of Christ's body, are united with him and are fed by him (Col 2:19). This image is similar to the image that speaks about Jesus as the true vine that is connected with the branches, which represent Christians (John 15:1-11). As the head of the body (Col 1:18), Christ is Lord of the church (Col 2:9-10). Because Christ is the head of the body and Lord of the church, the church is to be guided and controlled by his direction and activity.³⁰

Therefore, Christ directs, feeds, grows, protects, and cleans the body, and he prepares his body for its initial and eternal plan. Thus, where Christ is present in the midst of his people, his church is growing and increasing. Without the head, the church would not be the church of Christ.

³⁰ Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine*, 332.

Interdependence in the Body

Paul writes, “Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Rom 12:5). Therefore, no individual Christian can function effectively in isolation. In other words, each member is important, because we belong to one another.

This interdependence in the body of Christ calls each believer to grow and to build up one another. The apostle Paul explains this growth with one New Testament word, *allelon*, which can be translated in a positive or a negative sense.³¹ A church that manifests the fruit of the Holy Spirit is carrying out the injunctions to build up the body of Christ and enable those believers to reflect faith, hope, and love. The church that reflects the “acts of the sinful nature” keeps the church worldly and in a state of carnality.³²

How can a church become a mature body of believers, reflecting faith, hope, love, and other evidences of the fruit of the Spirit? The Scriptures give the answer. All believers must “live by the Spirit” and “keep step with the Spirit” (Gal 5:25). And to do this, we must follow the exhortations that build up the body of Christ (Eph 4:16) rather than destroying and dismantling it (Gal 5:15). As each believer carries out these positive injunctions and avoids the

³¹ Getz and Wall, *Effective Church Growth Strategies*, 57-58. The positive sense manifests “the fruit of the Spirit” (Gal 5:22), and the negative sense manifests “the acts of the sinful nature” (Gal 5:19). In fact, Paul used the word *allelon* (Gal 5:17) to contrast these two aspects: “For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other.”

³² Ibid., 59-60.

negative ones, the local church becomes more unified, Christ-like, and mature. And when that happens, the church may well grow numerically.³³

In the body of Christ, there is no such thing as an isolated, solitary Christian life. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul develops the concept of the interconnectedness of the body, especially in terms of the Spirit. Here we find the divine principle of dependence on one another. Each member has to encourage and build up the others. The members of the body are to bear one another's burdens (Gal 6:2). In Ephesians 4:11-16, Paul develops the idea of valuing each one's contribution.

Each member of the body is important. Members are arranged in the body of Christ by God's design (1 Cor 12:18; Eph 4:14-16). God has joined the members of the body one to another in such a way that each complements all the others to make up a full, complete body of Christ. Each member has received gifts. These gifts put together form one organism, the body of Christ.

In order for a church to be a real church, each person has to participate.³⁴ The reason, as Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, is that God sees us as members of one body: "The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink."

In 1 Corinthians 12:14-27, Paul describes the absurdity of Christians viewing

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 49.

themselves as individuals related only to Christ. He concludes, “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” (1 Cor 12:27).

In this context, Paul also describes various spiritual gifts,³⁵ each “given for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7). Every member and every gift is important for church growth. When each part of the body does its work, spiritual gifts can have a massive affect on church ministry. When each member of the body accepts responsibility, then the church will be a healthy body. In the New Testament, four passages speak about gifts in the body of Christ (Eph 4:11; Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 12:28-30; 1 Pet 4:8-10). These passages teach that God gives these gifts to the body to supply every need of the body.³⁶ There is no evidence that this list of gifts is meant to be conclusive. There may well be differing arrangements or clusters of gifts in individual members’ lives. Regardless of the gifts, the purpose is for building up the body of Christ.³⁷

Humility in the Body

In Romans 12:3 Paul says, “For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.” According to God’s perspective, no member of the body

³⁵ Bilezikian, *Community* 101, 80-81. When Bilezikian comments on 1 Corinthians 12:13, he says that spiritual gifts may be defined as competencies, skills, and talents that are energized or generated by the Holy Spirit in order to be used for the common good (1 Cor 12:7), that is, for edification and the building up of the church (1 Cor 14:4; 12). Scripture teaches that each believer has at least one such gift to contribute to the ministry of the church (1 Cor 12:11) and that no one may be excused or excluded from this responsibility (1 Cor 12:6, 15, 21). Ignorance about the spiritual gifts is a major dysfunction in the church.

³⁶ Leslie B. Flynn, *Nineteen Gifts of the Spirit* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1975).

³⁷ Robinson, *Total Church Life*, 142.

should feel more important than any other member of Christ's body. Paul emphasized that believers are equally important members of the body of Christ only through his grace.

Unity of the Body

Every biblical metaphor of the church, without exception, emphasizes its unity. Each metaphor involves a group related to the same perfect leader, Jesus Christ. In the body of Christ there is no such thing as an isolated believer. Whether they are babies, young men, or mature fathers spiritually (1 John 2:12-14), whether weak or strong (1 Cor 3:16), Christians are one (1 John 2:12-14). The apostle Paul challenged the Christians in Corinth to keep unity in the body: "What I mean is this: One of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ'" (1 Cor 1:12). To all this Paul replied, "Is Christ divided?" (1 Cor 1:13). And he concluded, "So then, no more boasting about men! All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God" (1 Cor 3:21-23).

By using this metaphor, Paul wants God's people to understand the importance of unity in the church. He wrote to the Corinthians, "I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought" (1 Cor 1:10). Also, Paul emphasizes

the unity of the body when he wrote to the church in Ephesus: “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3).

During his earthly ministry, Jesus prayed “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21). Jesus’ prayer teaches at least two important truths about unity. First, unity is important inside, for the believers to love one another; second, unity is important outside, for the world. When the church is characterized by unity, that is a powerful sign for non-Christians to believe in Jesus Christ. At the same time, it is true that diversity is essential to unity.³⁸

This author remembers well the days when the church of Christ in Moldova went through persecution by the communists. He was only a teenager but remembers that the greatest and most known sign of Baptists was the unity of the church. During that period, the churches in Moldova were known by atheists and by non-Christian people because of the unity of the believers. Today, when there is religious freedom and liberty and more opportunities, the greatest challenge of the churches in Moldova is to maintain unity.

True Christians form together a spiritual unity in Christ. Paul wrote to the Roman church, “So in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Rom 12:5), and then he emphasized the same idea to the Corinthian church: “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” (1 Cor 12:27).

³⁸ Ibid., 140.

The Spirituality of the Body

The church is not a human organization or a nice building; it is a living organism that is “joined and held together by every supporting ligament” and “grows and builds itself up in love” (Eph 4:16). In a general sense, there is one church. It is not an organization; it is an organism. It does not have organic unity; it has spiritual unity.³⁹ Commenting on the same subject, Darrell Robinson writes, “We need to remember that the church mustn’t be a building centered, but a people centered one.”⁴⁰ In other words, the metaphor of the body points to a living organism, that is, the church. John MacArthur argues that this image reveals the church not as an organization but as a living organism, made up of many interrelated and mutually dependent parts. Christ is the Head of this Body, and the Holy Spirit is, as it were, its lifeblood.⁴¹

The purpose of a church is to be the body of Christ, and as MacArthur writes, if this purpose persists, the church will be a Christ-filled body, a living one in the community, radiating the glory of the indwelling presence of Jesus. It will become the light of the world and the salt of the earth.⁴²

As members of the body, it is important for believers to come together. In Hebrews we read: “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as

³⁹ Herschel H. Hobbs, *Fundamentals of Our Faith* (Nashville: Broadman, 1960), 127-29. The general church, spoken of in Ephesians 5:32, includes born-again people from every nationality, every background, and every culture in this world. The word *church* here refers to that total body of redeemed people.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 21.

⁴¹ John MacArthur Jr., *The Body Dynamic* (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor, 1996), 9.

⁴² Ibid., 17.

some are in the habit of doing—and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Heb 10:23-25). In other words, common worship and gathering are not options for a true church, they're essential and an expression of the church's being, or divine nature.

The church comes together to lift up Jesus in praise, joy, and worship. The Bible says that where two or three are gathered in his name, he is in the midst of them. Robinson explains why common worship is so important: "As the church gathers, He moves to strengthen, energize, guide, and direct through the inspiration of His Word. He inspires and fills His people. God's people come together to encourage one another."⁴³

But the Lord also called the church to go out and be salt and light. Robinson emphasizes that "the church gathers for strengthening and scatters for service. The church gathers for worship, scatters for witness. The church gathers in praise, scatters in power. The church gathers in fellowship, scatters in faith it's Lord. The church gathers to equip the saints, scatters to evangelize the sinner."⁴⁴

In conclusion, all the passages about the church as the body of Christ indicate that the church is more than the sum of its human parts. The church has a prior reality in Christ, and that is the spiritual, heavenly dimension of its being. Christ existed before the church, and the church came to existence

⁴³ Robinson, *Total Church Life*, 20. Every Christian needs to be admonished and encouraged, prodded and provoked to love and good works. "In the modern world, many are negative about attending church" (20). The world says that it can worship God as well at home, in the mountains, or on the creek bank as it can in the church. But the fact is, it does not do so. "Those who truly worship Lord in private will also obey Him in corporate worship" (20). A meeting place is necessary and a building provides a base for meeting.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 22.

through incorporation into him. The church exists as Jesus Christ exists, but if he does not exist, the church will not exist.⁴⁵ As an earthly entity, the church is the people, but it is a people with a divine origin in the call of God, a supernatural basis in the redemptive work of Christ, and spiritual life from the Holy Spirit.⁴⁶

To be in Christ, to be the body of Christ, means to share his blessings and his status. Christ is a whole, yet he is in each of the parts: “Christ is all, and is in all” (Col 3:11). And because Jesus Christ loved the church and died for it, he continues to love his church. Therefore, “worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” (Rev 5:12).

The People of God, Called for Mission

He cannot have God for his father who does not have the church for his mother.

—Augustine

Another significant analogy that the Bible uses to describe the church's identity is that of the people of God. In 2 Peter it says, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (2 Peter 2:9-10). And then the apostle continues to explain an important aspect

⁴⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.3 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1962), 754-55.

⁴⁶ Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*, 99.

of this analogy. He urges his addressee to live such good lives among the pagans that, though the pagans accuse them of doing wrong, they may see the good deeds of God's people and glorify God on the day he visits us (2 Peter 2:11). In other words, Peter was calling those churches to witness Christ not only through words but also through their good lifestyle.

Karl Barth said, "The being of the people of God is grounded only in its God, and the being of the Christian community only in Jesus Christ as its Lord."⁴⁷ The church is the people of God in Christ Jesus. In 1 Peter 2:9-10, the apostle Peter weaves a tapestry of Old Testament language to describe the church (Exod 19:6; Isa 43:20-21; Hos 1:6, 9; 2:1). The relationship between God and his people was disrupted by sin, so that Israel was made Lo-Amii, "not my people" (Hos 1:9; Matt 21:43), but Peter here hails the fulfillment of Hosea's promise. By God's grace, those who were not his people, whether covenant-breaking Jews or Gentiles outside the covenant, are made the people of God and receive mercy (Hos 1:10).⁴⁸

Paul wrote about God's plan to make believers his people: "God has said: 'I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people'" (2 Cor 6:16). The church is constituted of God's people. They belong to him, and he belongs to them.⁴⁹ Also, the concept of

⁴⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV.3, 753.

⁴⁸ Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 29.

⁴⁹ Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine*, 331-32.

the church as the people of God emphasizes God's initiative in choosing them.⁵⁰

Peter wrote, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare⁵¹ the praises⁵² of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Peter 2:9-10). These verses emphasize several significant aspects regarding the metaphor of the people of God. First, the people of God are chosen by God. Second, the people of God are chosen to belong to God. Third, the people of God are called out of darkness into his wonderful light. Fourth, the people of God are chosen people to declare his Good News. And finally, the people of God are chosen to receive mercy. The image of the church as the people of God has three implications.

God Provides Care and Protection to His People

The Lord protects his church "as the apple of his eye" (Deut 32:10). Jesus promised his disciples that he will protect the church and be with his disciples (Matt 16; 18:20-28). Paul emphasized this truth in Romans 8:31-39:

⁵⁰ Ibid., 331. In the Old Testament, God did not adopt as his own an existing nation but created a people for himself. He chose Abraham and then, through him, brought into being the people of Israel. Among the Old Testament texts in which Israel is identified as God's people are Exodus 15:13, 16; Numbers 14:18; Deuteronomy 32:9-10; Isaiah 62:4; Jeremiah 12:7-10; Hosea 1:9-10; 2:23. In Romans 9:24-26, Paul applies the statements in Hosea to God's taking in of Gentiles as well as Jews.

⁵¹ The Greek word for "declare" is *exaggello*, which means to tell out or forth, to declare abroad, divulge, publish; to make known by praising or proclaiming. In other words, the people of God are called to declare and publish the Good News.

⁵² The Greek word for "praises" is *arête*, which means a virtuous course of thought; virtue in feeling and action; moral goodness; any particular moral excellence.

What shall we then say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare not his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charges against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

God Expects His People to Have Undivided Loyalty

All the people of God are marked with a special brand, as it were. In the Old Testament, circumcision was proof of divine ownership. It was an external sign of the covenant that made Israel God's people. It was also a subjective sign of the covenant that was applied individually to each person, whereas the ark of the covenant served as an objective sign for the group.

Instead of this external circumcision of the flesh, under the new covenant⁵³ there is an inward circumcision of the heart. A particular quality of holiness is expected of the people of God (Eph 5:25-27). The church must be separated from the world: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able

⁵³ For Israel, the covenant was the Abrahamic covenant; for the church, it is the new covenant wrought and established by Christ (2 Cor 3:3-18).

to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Rom 12:2). To be the people of God gives a sense of importance and purpose to our lives and to the church. It also makes us depend on God in everything.

Since the church is God's people, believers must live as God's people. The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: ‘I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.’ ‘Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you’” (2 Cor 6:16-17). It is also said, “I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty” (2 Cor 6:18). Therefore God's church is not just a simple association of likeminded religious individuals. As Ferguson says, it is not a democracy. It is always dependent on and defined by the free choosing and call of God. The church has corporate personhood.⁵⁴

God Desires the Church to Bring All the Glory to Him

Peter emphasized, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Pet 2:9-10). The church is called by Its Lord to declare that Jesus Christ is the Lord of lords and King of kings.

⁵⁴ Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*, 90.

Therefore, as chosen people belonging to God, those who received mercy are called to be salt and light.

CONCLUSION

When Peters comments on these metaphors, he says, "The statements, motherhoods, and designations above have great implications and far-reaching significance. Let none dare to manipulate, dominate, exploit, mislead, or mismanage the church of God."⁵⁵ In other words, all the metaphors emphasize that God alone has property rights to the church. All that the church is, has, does, and becomes is due to the fact that it has a divine origin and that the Holy Spirit is at work.⁵⁶

The church is not a human institution or organization.⁵⁷ It cannot be built by techniques and methodology alone. It is an organism that was born by the Holy Spirit of God on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). It is a natural phenomenon of history, but history did not raise it. Therefore, forever the church remains the church of God (Eph 2:22).

Jesus uttered the most important statement about the church: "I will build my church" (Matt 16:18).⁵⁸ C. Peter Wagner writes that because of this truth, church growth will always contain an element of mystery that defies all

⁵⁵ Peters, *A Theology of Church Growth*, 53. The author also argues that church New Testament images demonstrate us that the church is divine in its eternal election, in its purchase and redemption, in its possession and belongingness, in its design and purpose, in its destiny, and also in its origin and historical realization."

⁵⁶ Ibid., 55.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 52. It is also a divine creation, a mystery, a new man appearing on the scene (Eph 2:10, 15), because God acted in history. Pentecost is a divine miracle, a heavenly intervention. God in and through Holy Spirit invaded humankind and interrupted the regular course of history in a supernatural, unprecedented manner and called the church into being.

⁵⁸ C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1981), 53-54.

human penetration, analysis, and definition and casts us back on the head of the church in prayer, trustful waiting, and patient labor (1 Cor 3:6-8).⁵⁹ The church is not owned or absolutely managed by humans (Acts 20:28).

The highest expression of God's will in this age is the church he purchased with his own blood.⁶⁰ Jesus is the one who loved the church (Eph 5:25). He built and established the church (Matt 16:13-18); therefore, he is its only foundation (1 Cor 3:11), not Peter, Paul, or any other man (1 Cor 1:12-13). He is the head of the church (Eph 1:22-23; 5:23), because the church is purchased by the blood of Christ (Acts 20:28). Therefore Christ is the one who adds people to the church and makes it to grow (Acts 2:47). And finally, he will present the church to himself as a radiant church, without stain, wrinkle, or blemish, holy and blameless (Eph 5:27).

The church of Jesus Christ is a divine creation (Eph 2:10). Therefore, it finds its source in the eternal counsel of God (Eph 1:4; 3:11). Its origin, design, composition, mission, purpose, vitality, and destiny are expressions of the love, wisdom, grace, power, and pleasure of God (Eph 1:3-12).⁶¹ Consequently, it becomes obvious that for a church to grow, that church has to discover and maintain the original identity that was given the founder, builder, and head of the church, Jesus Christ. As we will observe in the next chapter, identity is the key factor that determines an authentic church's purposes. In other words, when a church is the church, then nothing can

⁵⁹ Peters, *A Theology of Church Growth*, 53.

⁶⁰ Warren W. Wiersbe, comp., *The Best of A. W. Tozer* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publication, 1978), 64.

⁶¹ Ibid., 29. It is the church of God, the household of God, the priesthood of God, the body of Christ, the bride of Christ, and the temple of God, indwelled by Holy Spirit.

stand against its purposes and growth. That is why the church's first preoccupation is to have a biblical, authentic understanding of its identity (what is to be) and then an understanding of its purposes (what it is to do).

Chapter 3

THE BIBLICAL PURPOSES OF A HEALTHY, GROWING CHURCH

INTRODUCTION

In chapter 2, it was shown that God's greatest concern is for what the local church is and then for what the church does. The being (the identity) of the local church must always precede the doing (purposes) of the local church, for what we do will be according to what we are. Therefore, a biblical understanding of church's being is a primary prerequisite for an authentic understanding of the church's purposes.

This chapter will put emphasis on the church's call or purposes. Healthy, growing churches understand that an authentic identity determines the ability of the church to understand its divine purposes and to grow and advance. And because of that, such churches will be precise in understanding their divine call.

Healthy, growing churches must search for God's vision and ask big questions about identity and purpose. When the local church clearly knows its identity, then the process of discerning, by biblical guidelines, authentic purposes becomes much easier. A clear self-knowledge is a mark of a healthy church. Gil Rendle and Alice Mann state that for congregations, honest self-knowledge reflects a maturity that allows for making clear and purposeful decisions to navigate the future.¹

¹ Gil Rendle and Alice Mann, *Holy Conversation* (Washington, DC: The Alban Institute, 2003), 4.

According to the research and survey among Moldova's pastors and churches, a key factor for church growth is to have and follow God's purposes. But how can we identify or discern if that purpose is a biblical one? There might be many answers, but the author of the research will emphasize that authentic church purposes are distinguished by three main characteristics: they are Christ-centered, grounded in the Word of God, and guided by power of the Holy Spirit.

This chapter will begin by discussing the reality of the church's call, the response of the church to its call, and the responsibility of the church to its divine call.

The Reality of the Church's Call

According to Ken Hemphill, church growth is mandated by the origin, nature, and purpose of the church and the great need of the world. Authentic church growth is a promised divine activity for a church rightly related to Christ. God designed his church to grow, and he has empowered it to grow. For those reasons, church growth is supernatural, because only God can cause it. Thus, when churches grow, God receives the glory. When people are privileged to join him in this activity, it is the result of his grace alone.²

What characterizes most of our local congregations, whether big or small, is distraction.³ And it is easy for a church to be distracted, not necessarily with the wrong things, but even by good things. For example, a

² Ken Hemphill, *The Antioch Effect* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 21.

³ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 235.

church might be distracted by structures, buildings, forms, order of worship, music style, denominations, board meetings, and conferences. But what really is meaningful, as Dallas Willard says, is to “pay attention to the ‘principles and absolutes’ of the New Testament church and, one might suppose, everything else will fall into place—in large part because ‘everything else’ really doesn’t matter much one way or the other.”⁴

In this chapter, we will identify that biblical purposes have at least three main characteristics.

First, the church’s call must be Christ-centered. At the end of his ministry on earth, Jesus said to his followers, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:18-19). On another occasion Jesus told his disciples, “Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:4-5). And later in that discussion, Jesus emphasized, “You are my friends if you do what I command” (John 15:14). In Colossians, we read that Jesus “is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head

⁴ Ibid., 236.

of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him" (Col 1:15-19). A Christ-centered purpose is what the apostle Paul described when he wrote, "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever! Amen" (Rom 11:36).

Second, the church's call must be grounded in the Word of God. Paul wrote to Timothy, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17). The nation or church that ignores God's Word can anticipate spiritual anarchy and lack of clear direction.⁵ Since church growth is a supernatural activity, it follows that vision for growth will come from God and be grounded in his Word. It is obedience to this God-given vision that gives the church restraint and provides direction.⁶

Third, the church's call must be guided by the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said to his disciples, "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come" (John 16:13). Jesus also said, "The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you" (John 14:26). In the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit is at the center of all the

⁵ Robert L. Alden, *Proverbs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), 202.

⁶ Hemphill, *The Antioch Effect*, 129.

church's activities. The Holy Spirit empowered Jesus' disciples for ministry (Acts 1:8); they preached in the power of Holy Spirit (Acts 4:8, 31). The deacons were filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom (Acts 6:3; 7:55); and the Holy Spirit spoke to the church in Antioch and told them what to do (Acts 13:2).

The Response to the Church's Call

Where there is no vision, the people perish.

—Proverbs 29:18 (KJV)

For a church to experience healthy growth, it is necessary to know and understand God's purposes. Growing, healthy churches have a clear-cut identity and a clear-cut understanding of God's call. As Rick Warren says, growing churches understand their reason for being; they are precise in their purpose. They know exactly what God has called them to do and what not to do.⁷ A church without a clear understanding of what God wants it to do cannot experience God's growth. Warren emphasizes that nothing discourages a church more than not knowing why it exists. And nothing will revitalize a discouraged church faster than rediscovering God's purpose for that church. Plans and personalities do not last, but God's purposes will last. Therefore, the local church must pray and look for God's purposes and help members understand the great tasks that the church has been given by Christ.⁸

⁷ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 82.

⁸ Ibid., 81-87.

Growing churches understand the value of following God's purposes for them. Biblical goals give direction for reaching a desired result and enable the church to evaluate progress. Hemphill states that goals help to define and articulate what our vision dictates, develop a clear strategy, evaluate progress, build faith, create dependence upon God, and see and celebrate the activity of God in our midst.⁹ Warren reiterates that a clear purpose builds morale (1 Cor 1:10), reduces frustration (Isa 26:3; Jas 1:8), allows concentration (Phil 3:13),¹⁰ fosters cooperation (Ezra 10:4; Phil 4:15), and assists evaluation (2 Cor 13:5).¹¹

Therefore, a primary responsibility of church leaders is to help the congregation understand where it is going, why such a direction is important, and how to get there. Leaders need to help people find worthy goals.¹² If a church ignores God's purposes for its activities, it will lack clear direction and growth. A growing church has to be in continuous prayer, with a deep willingness to understand where God is leading it. And once the church understands God's will, its ministries will be centered on that will.

Church growth is strongly linked to and depends on our willingness to do what God has called us to do, as Paul confirmed (1 Cor 3:5-7). Lack of a clear understanding of God's purposes for the church is not an option. "For we," the apostle wrote, "are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building" (1 Cor 3:9). Therefore, he concluded, "By the grace God has given

⁹ Hemphill, *The Antioch Effect*, 208.

¹⁰ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 89-90. In his opinion, most churches try to do too much. Being efficient is not the same as being effective.

¹¹ Ibid., 85-94.

¹² Rendle and Mann, *Holy Conversations*, xi.

me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 3:10-11).

A brief summary of these arguments confirms that one of the greatest needs in this time is for "the church to be the church," a first-century church in a twenty-first-century world. One of the greatest challenges for the Christian church-today is to understand its reason for being and the purpose of its activities. Many times, churches focus on doing for God instead of being with God. Peter Scazzero says that work for God that is not nourished by a deep interior life with God will eventually be contaminated by ego, power, needing approval of from others, and buying into wrong ideas of success and the mistaken belief that we cannot fail. When we work for God because of these things, our experience of the gospel often falls off center. Our activity for God can properly flow only from a life with God. We cannot give what we do not possess. Doing for God in a way that is proportionate to our being with God is the only pathway to seeing God (see Matt 5:8).¹³

¹³ Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* (Nashville: Integrity, 2006), 31-32.

The Responsibility to the Church's Call

It isn't our job to create the purposes of the church but to discover them.

—Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*

What has God called the church to do? God wants his church not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of the mind so that the church “will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Rom 12:2). And to have a biblical understanding of what the church has been called to do involves at least three things.

First, we must remember Jesus’ words: “I will build my church.” And because he is the founder and the owner of the church, it is not our responsibility to create or invent its purposes. Rather, our responsibility is to understand what Jesus has called his church to do. The apostle Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus, “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or blemish, but holy and blameless” (Eph 5:25-27). In Ephesians 2:10, Paul says, “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” And Paul concludes, “Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become

a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Eph 2:19-22). And Jesus commanded his disciples, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28:19).

Second, we must look at the being of the church. In other words, we must look at the church's identity as it is expressed through images and analogies in the New Testament. Each of these images has profound implications in discovering and understanding God's purposes for the local church. The New Testament describes the church in several ways, and each analogy describes a different aspect of the church's identity. Study of these images will help us to understand better what God wants the church to do.

Jesus used many analogies about the purposes of the church and God's kingdom. Like a mustard seed, the church started small and yet has grown quite large (Matt 13:31-32). The church is like a field in which weeds are scattered among the wheat (Matt 13:24-30). It is like a fishnet that catches bad fish as well as good (Matt 13:47-50). The church is like a vineyard in which some people work a long time and others only a short time (Matt 20:1-16). The church is like servants who were given money to invest for the master, and some produce more fruit than others (Matt 25:14-30).

Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd, and his disciples as his sheep (Mark 26:31). His mission was to seek lost sheep (Matt 18:11-14), to feed and care for them (John 21:15-17). Later, Paul and Peter use the same analogy,

telling church leaders that they are called to be shepherds of Christ's flock (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:2). Paul wrote that members of the church "are . . . God's building" (1 Cor 3:9), and the foundation is Jesus Christ (1 Cor 3:11). The apostle Peter said that believers are all "living stones . . . being built into a spiritual house" (1 Pet 2:5). One day the church will hear, "Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready" (Rev 19:7).

Third, we must look at the example of the apostolic church. In the book of Acts and in the Epistles, there are descriptions of different churches that made an impact during that time. These churches were known for their growth, both spiritually and numerically. A study of the nature and activities of the churches in Jerusalem, Antioch,¹⁴ Philippi, and Thessalonica will give a deeper understanding of the church's identity and its call. In Acts 2:42-47, Luke describes what the church accomplished. The first Christians fellowshipped, edified one another, ministered, evangelized, and worshiped. As a result of their doing, we read in Acts 2:47, "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

A BIBLICAL APPROACH TO THE PURPOSES OF THE CHURCH

When the local church lives according to what God has called it to do and be, then its growth is inevitable, because the church's growth is God's

¹⁴ Hemphill, *The Antioch Effect*. In this book, the author offers an exhaustive study of the church in Antioch. He identifies eight characteristics of growing, healthy congregations and makes specific recommendations for evaluating and shoring up the spiritual foundations of the local church.

divine work through people who are willing to follow God's will. As the owner of the church, God has already established the purposes of the church, and those purposes are not negotiable.¹⁵

Looking at the church's identity as it is expressed through the images and analogies in the New Testament, we find that healthy churches understand that each of these images has profound implications as the church discerns and understands God's purposes for it.

In this chapter, we will see that a growing church understands that as the temple of God, it is called to authentic worship. As the household of God, the church is called to authentic fellowship. As the bride of Christ, the church is called to authentic discipleship. As the body of Christ, the church is called to authentic ministry. And as the people of God, the church is called to authentic evangelism.

As the Temple of God, the Church Is Called to Worship

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe.

—Hebrews 12:28

The church's first mission is to worship God. Therefore, one of the greatest needs of today's churches is to have a clear and a biblical understanding of worship. All the other aspects of the church's mission will flow from worship, and without biblical worship, the church will fail. And when

¹⁵ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 98.

a church does not worship in a biblical manner, the world will suffer because of this failure, too.

Frequently, we take a new believer and make him a minister as soon as we can. But God has another intention for new believers; he wants new believers first to learn how to be worshipers, and then to be ministers. Therefore, as Karl Barth said, Christian worship is the most important, the most urgent, and the most glorious action that can happen in a person's life.¹⁶

The Importance of Worship for Church Growth

As Ralph Martin argues, the entire New Testament emphasizes that God calls the church to be a worshiping community.¹⁷ Jesus' words confirm the priority of worship. When Jesus was tempted by the devil, he said, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only'" (Matt 4:10). This verse emphasizes that worshiping God is the first purpose of God's people.

Robert E. Webber also argues that the primary work of the church is worship. Evangelism is an important work of the church, as are teaching, fellowship, servanthood, missions, and the healing of broken lives. But worship stands behind all these activities. The church is first a worshiping community. Evangelism and other functions flow from the worship of the church. Corporate worship is the source of spiritual life and growth.¹⁸

¹⁶ Karl Barth, cited in J. J. Von Allemen, *Worship* (London: Lutterworth, 1965), 13.

¹⁷ Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 10.

¹⁸ Robert E. Webber, *Worship Is a Verb* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 7-8.

The first thing that the Holy Spirit taught the first Christians was how to worship God in common. In Acts 2, Luke describes the first worship form of the early church:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. (Acts 2:42-47)

As a result of their biblical worship, "the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). The early church met to worship God, to grow spiritually, to have fellowship with one another, to serve in the body of Christ, and to evangelize. If these principles are not respected, the church will suffer.¹⁹ Thus, the church's primary task is not what to do but what to be, because all the church's tasks and activities have to flow from worship. And L. D. Brown's words emphasize the priority of worship for a growing church: "Worship is necessary to the church, because where is no worship, there is no church."²⁰ In other words, worship provides the power from God that makes the church to be the church.²¹

As the people of God, the church belongs to him; therefore its primary mission is to glorify God in a biblical way (Rom 15:6; Eph 1:5; 12; 14; 3:21; 1 Thess 1:8; 1 Pet 4:4). Speaking about the importance of worship in the

¹⁹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), 1057.

²⁰ L. D. Brown, *The Life of the Church* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987), 79. He also argues that worship is necessary, but true worship flows into fellowship, edification, and evangelism.

²¹ Frank M. Segler, *Christian Worship* (Nashville: Broadman, 1967), 11.

church, Watson mentions that the first purpose of the church is to worship God. The people of God are called to be a worship community. Therefore, the church first must be defined in relationship with God, next with brothers, and finally with the world.²²

The book of Revelation reveals that all of history will culminate in a society that will worship forever in the presence of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Through this book one discovers that God will restore the world according his original plan. Our relationship with God began with worship and will culminate with worship. The creature will worship the Creator for all eternity (Rev 5:4; 7:9-17; 22:3). According to this perspective, worship on earth is practice for the eternal worship of God, who is worthy to be praised. And when a church worships in a biblical way, God's growth will be the imminent result of that worship.

The Importance of Common Worship for Church Growth

A church that grows knows the importance of coming together as an expression of the body of Christ. For a growing church, gathering together is not an option but a natural expression of its identity and call. The importance and value of gathering together is clearly presented in the New Testament. The Gospels speak about the importance of unity. The book of Acts also

²² David Watson, *I Believe in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 179.

notes that the first church gathered for worship. The apostle Paul speaks about the gathering of the believers in 1 Corinthians 14.²³

Common worship is a crucial factor for the church's growth. Today, many Christians are tempted to reduce the importance of belonging to a local church, and this has to do with a misunderstanding of the nature of common worship. Many Christians see common worship as an option and not as an opportunity or a privilege. If common worship is seen only as a program with some songs, prayers, and preaching, then it could be concluded that common worship is an option. But if common worship is viewed as a vehicle for fellowship with one another and with God, then common worship becomes a great opportunity and privilege. There are at least two main reasons why common worship is crucial for the church's growth.

First, God commands us to meet together. The Bible says, "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Heb 10:25). The central idea of this verse is that members of the body of Christ need one another. The author of this epistle also says, "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds" (Heb 10:24).

Second, common worship is important because the church is a body. Each worshiper, being a member of the body of Christ, is responsible for participating and being part of the common worship of the local church (see 1

²³ David Peterson, *Engaging with God* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 211-12. In 1 Corinthians 14, the gathering is nothing less than "the whole church" coming together "at the same place." One of the first issues in the chapter is intelligibility. Being "inspired" is not enough: when Christians gather together words should convey meaningful truth.

Cor 12:4). Common worship affects personal worship, and personal worship affects common worship. Therefore, what believers do in common worship will affect indirectly what they do in the following week. The apostle Paul explained to Titus that Jesus Christ “gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good” (Tit 2:14). In other words, Jesus died on the cross not to save isolated individuals but to create a worship community that will belong to him. Therefore Paul exhorted, “For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again” (2 Cor 5:14-15).

Healthy churches gather regularly to worship God in ways that engage the heart, mind, soul, and strength of the people. The operative word here is “engage.” Unless we plan worship opportunities that connect our people’s hearts with the heart of the Almighty, we need to evaluate the purpose of worship. The shift from traditional to contemporary is an attempt to fully engage the worshiper in the experience of worship and deep love and adoration for the God of the universe who receives the praise of his people.²⁴

The Meaning of Biblical Worship

The term “worship” is frequently used by Christians, but it seems that a large category of believers do not have a clear understanding of what worship means. Also, the word *worship* has more than one meaning, and it is used in

²⁴ Stephen A. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 20.

different contexts. Therefore it is hard to explain worship with a single definition. But William Temple offers this definition of worship: "Worship is the submission of all our nature to God. It is the quickening of the conscience by His holiness; the nourishment of the mind with the truth; the purifying of imagination by His beauty; the opening of the heart to His love; the surrender of will to His purpose—and all of this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable."²⁵

True biblical worship involves two fundamental elements, revelation and response:²⁶ revelation, through which God reveals himself to people, and answer, through which man, with reverence and adoration, responds to God the Father, through Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit. In other words, worship is an act of adoration and an act of service (Heb 13:15-16).

Worship is not a simple attitude, feeling, or form; it is an answer and a declaration.²⁷ Therefore the absolute and eternal difference between God's creatures and God the Creator can have only one right response, worship. There is no another possible relationship between Creator and his creation than worship.

Worship in churches that grow and advance is characterized by God's presence. In such churches, worship is not reduced to a program. It is an act of praise and gratitude when God speaks and his people respond. Robert White says,

²⁵ William Temple, *Reading in St. John's Gospel* (London: Macmillan, 1940), 68, cited in Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 80.

²⁶ Martin, *The Worship of God*, 6.

²⁷ Ronald Allen and Gordon Borror, *Worship* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1982), 16.

The worship service is not just another meeting to attend during the week. Corporate worship of God presents a unique opportunity to experience the divine presence of God. When believers gather for worship, God shows up. The spirit of God moves among the worshipers to comfort the broken hearts, heal hearts and convict lost people of their need for a personal relationship with Jesus. . . . Anytime you miss gathering for worship with God's people you miss the miraculous presence of God.²⁸

The Nature of Biblical Worship in a Growing Church

Centered in Christ. One of the greatest needs of worship is to establish Christ at the center of it. During the history of the church, worship was has been plagued with an anthropocentric instead of christocentric approach. There is a profound temptation for worship services to become human-centered. James Torrance says that many times worship can be observed as something we do on Sunday at the church. We go to church, we sing psalms and hymns to God, and we offer our talents to God. Of course, we need God's grace to help us, and we worship because Jesus told us to do so. But worship is what we do. Such an anthropocentric perspective, says Torrance, is not evangelical and not trinitarian.²⁹ This kind of worship approach subtly excludes Christ-centered worship.

The greatest mark of biblical worship is that it is Christ-centered. In the epistle to the Romans, the apostle Paul gives a comprehensive definition of Christ-centered worship: "For from him and through him and to him are all

²⁸ Robert White, *Healthy Kingdom Churches* (Friendswood, TX: Baxter Press, 2002), 51.

²⁹ James Torrance, *The Forgotten Trinity*, ed. Alasdair I. C. Heron (London: Inter-Church House, 1991), 5-6.

things. To him be the glory forever! Amen" (Rom 11:36). In his epistle to the Ephesians, Paul calls us to

praise . . . the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace. (Eph 1:3-7)

In Ephesians 1:11 he says, "In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will." And Paul concludes that all of these purposes are "in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory" (Eph 1:12).

In Colossians, Paul speaks about the supremacy of Christ, setting forth crucial truths for Christ-centered worship:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation. (Col 1:15-22)

In Philippians, Paul explains that because of Christ's death on the cross, "God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:9-11). And Paul exalted, "to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen" (Eph 3:21).

All these passages prove that God in his Trinity is not just the object of our worship, but, in an amazing way, through his grace, is the agent of worship.³⁰ So, we cannot worship God the Father without worshiping through the mediation of Christ. "There is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim 2:5).

Willard argues that "when we gather in our meetings, however, we do not come to see how the speaker and other leaders do. We are not checking their performance. We come to encounter the trinitarian presence and to hold them up within it. In Paul's language, we are "resolved to know nothing . . . except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). We expect to find Christ in others, and that is all we are looking for. We do not worship 'worship' or a fine service or impeccable teaching or fine-looking people."³¹

In conclusion, the primary distinction between Christianity and other world religions is found in the person of Jesus Christ. When Jesus ceases to

³⁰ James Torrance, *Worship Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 6-7.

³¹ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 247.

exist in worship, true worship does not exist anymore, because only in and through Jesus Christ can a church worship God.

Grounded in the Word of God. The second mark of growing churches is the centrality of God's Word in worship. The Bible says that "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Therefore, at the foundation of genuine worship is the inspired Word of God. In Paul's second epistle to Timothy, he says, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16). There is no substitute for the Word of God in biblical worship. The Word of God will govern the worship of a growing church. According to a survey among more than 80 pastors from Moldova, about 80% of them identified the Word of God as a key factor for church growth. And if the Word of God is neglected or substituted, there is no biblical worship, and there is no growth in the church. Therefore, a true worshiping church will be one that loves and delights in the Word of God.

Biblical worship is focused on God. Christian worship is distinct from all other religious worship because it is addressed to a holy, personal God who exists in three persons.³² Jesus said, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only'" (Matt 4:10). Therefore, Christian worship by its nature is centered on God;³³ in other words, it is theocentric. The Bible reveals that God took the initiative in worship by creating man for an eternal

³² W. D. Maxwell, *An Outline of Christian Worship* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 1-2.

³³ Martin, *The Worship of God*, 17.

fellowship with him. Thus, worship is right only when it is brought to God, according to his nature and character. He is a personal God; therefore, says Colin Gonton, God is looking for fellowship and communion with each one of us, because his nature is communion.³⁴

In biblical worship, people must feel God's presence among them. This is the time when God wants to reveal himself to his people, speak to his people, and hear his people's response. Isaiah 6:1 shows that when we gather for worship, we should expect to sense the awesome presence of God. God is everywhere and is not confined to buildings made with hands. Therefore, says Bob Russell, worship should be neither sheer boredom nor surface entertainment. It should convey a deep respect for the holiness, the majesty, the joy, and the power of the almighty God in our midst.³⁵

In a growing church, the main goal of worship is not performance. The first goal is not to make an impression but to be what we are. Dallas Willard notes that the element of performance would be absent in a trinitarian gathering, as would constant solicitude concerning "How did the service go?" God is the primary agent in the gathering.³⁶ The primary purpose of worship is not to entertain those sitting in the pews but to glorify God.³⁷ Most people view worship as though God were the prompter, the leader is the performer, and the congregation is the audience. In reality, the leader is the prompter, the congregants are the performers, and God is the audience. We worship to

³⁴ Colin Gonton, *The Promise of the Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 72.

³⁵ Bob Russell, *When God Builds a Church* (Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing, 2000), 48-49.

³⁶ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 246.

³⁷ Russell, *When God Builds a Church*, 42.

bring glory to God and express our gratitude for his goodness. Our goal is to please him.³⁸

In biblical worship, two ingredients always seem to be present: a sense of awe and a sense of joy.³⁹ The primary purpose of worship is to honor God, but corporate worship should also uplift and encourage believers. A true worship service will inspire and help people to meet God. Therefore, the most important purpose of worship is an awareness of the presence of God.

Therefore, it is essential that the church keep God as the subject of worship, since to be Christian means to believe that the God revealed in Jesus Christ is everything to us: Creator, Provider, and Sustainer; Deliverer, Redeemer, and Lord; Sanctifier, Inspirer, and Empowerer.⁴⁰ Thus, our primary focus in worship is not to please people but to please God.

Man, God's creation, is the unique being in the universe created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26-27), with the privilege and capacity of having fellowship with God. The fall of man interrupted this fellowship, but through Jesus Christ, God takes the initiative to restore the broken relationship between God and man. Therefore John wrote, "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3). Therefore, as Torrance observes, worship is the gift of grace. The Father has given to us the Son and the Spirit to draw us into a life of shared

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 43.

⁴⁰ Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, 76.

communion—participating through the Spirit in the Son’s communion with the Father—that we might be drawn in love into the trinitarian life of God.⁴¹

Therefore, biblical worship becomes the greatest place on the earth for genuine fellowship with God the Father through the Son and Holy Spirit. Authentic fellowship with God in the worship involves several aspects.

First, authentic fellowship with God in worship involves union with Christ. Our union with Christ is indispensable for our Christian identity. The expressions “in Christ,” “in him,” and “in the Lord” are central in the New Testament.⁴² Our union with Christ has its origin in God’s plan and purpose (Eph 1:4) and begins when we are brought alive with Christ (Eph 2:5). Our union with Christ is continued in our spiritual growth (1 Cor 3:1). The nature of our fellowship with God is so vital that Paul says, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20). In Ephesians 5:32, Paul tells us that this is “a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.” And because we are in union with Christ, we are blessed with a new status (1 John 3:1; Gal 2:17; Phil 3:9), a new life (Rom 6:1-11; Gal 2:17), and a new community (Eph 2:13-3:6). So, as members of the body of Christ, we not only belong to him but also are a part of his spiritual body.

Second, authentic fellowship with God in worship involves knowing God. In genuine biblical worship, God will reveal himself to his people through

⁴¹ Torrance, *Worship Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 36.

⁴² These expressions appear in the New Testament at least 144 times.

his Word. Christianity is a revealed religion. If God would not reveal himself to us, there would be no chance for us to know him. The apostle Paul says that we can know him because we are known by God (Gal 4:9). And the Bible is the most practical way to know God. Jesus said, “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life” (John 5:39). For Paul, knowing God was one of the greatest purposes in his life. He says, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death” (Phil 3:10). Therefore, fellowship with God in an authentic worshiping and growing church will lead not only to theological gnosis but also to a personal relationship with God. Such a fellowship will lead to spiritual growth and to a deep desire to more like Jesus. Adolphe Monod said, “The philosophy which places the man in the center of its preoccupations, says ‘Know yourself.’ But only the inspired Word, that has its origin in God, was able to declare: ‘know God.’”⁴³

Third, authentic fellowship with God in worship involves dialogue.⁴⁴ We said earlier that worship involves two aspects:⁴⁵ first, God speaks, and second, his people respond to his revelation. Therefore, worship is an act through which the worshiper hears God’s revelation and his will and Word; understanding these, the worshiper turns to respond to God.

⁴³ Adolphe Monod, cited in G. Findlay, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, in *Expositor’s Bible* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1992), 68.

⁴⁴ Robert Rayburn, *O Come, Let Us Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980), 118-19, who also argues that true worship involves a dialogue with God.

⁴⁵ Torrance, *The Forgotten Trinity*, 10-11. In this understanding of worship, we can discern a double movement: first, from God toward man, from the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit; and second, from man to God, toward the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. This double movement is the heart of the dialogue in worship between God and humanity.

Throughout history, God spoke in different ways. He spoke through special chosen people (Heb 1:1), the prophets (Heb 1:1), and miraculously, powerfully, and supremely through his Son, Jesus Christ (Heb 1:2). Today, God continues to speak through his written Word that is inspired by his Holy Spirit (Rom 10:17; John 17:20; 2 Tim 3:16). And when God's Word takes the central place in a worshiping church, the members of the church will be edified and challenged to become more like Christ, and that church will grow. For instance, preaching is not merely the minister's talk about God but God's talk. It is the kind of talk that produces a new people.⁴⁶

When God speaks to his people during worship, John Stott says, we should observe three main characteristics. First, God speaks always in such way that people understand him (this is the principle of simplicity); second, God speaks in a specific context to a specific need (this is the historic principle); and third, God speaks without contradiction (this is the principle of harmony).⁴⁷ Therefore, those who preach the Word of God should respect these principles, too. The God who spoke continues to speak. He who spoke in times past through the prophets and apostles continues to speak to us. Therefore, Scripture reading in worship is not a recital of past events. Rather, it is part of the immediate experience of God bringing the power and effect of that passage into our experience and applying it to our life. Scripture that is

⁴⁶ Michael Horton, *A Better Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 39.

⁴⁷ John R. W. Stott, in a course that was taught in the Bible Institute, Oradea, Romania, 1993.

imbued with this kind of power cannot be passively received. It deserves a response.⁴⁸

There are different ways through which worshipers respond to God's Word, but one of the greatest ways is prayer. Prayer, says Peterson, is the most deeply human action in which we can engage. The life of prayer, the practice of prayer, is at the center of the human enterprise.⁴⁹ Fundamentally, prayer is our response to the God who speaks to us. God's word is always first. He gets the first word in, always. We answer. We come to consciousness in a world addressed by God. We need to learn how to answer.⁵⁰

In the New Testament, prayer was a priority in the life of Jesus (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16; 9:18; 9:29; 11:1). Prayer was a priority in the life of the apostolic church (Acts 2:42; 6:4; 12:12; 16:25). And every growing church and every great revival in the church has begun as a result of prayer. Webber writes:

One of the greatest discoveries of my Christian pilgrimage has come with the realization that the primary importance in worship is not what *I* do, but what *God* is doing. In worship God is present, speaking to me, and acting. It is in worship that God feeds, nourishes, and cares for me. And it is in worship that he gives me his grace, surrounds me with his love, lifts me up into his arms, affirms me as a member of his community, and sends me forth onto the world with a fresh vision of his work and a new concern to live for him.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Webber, *Worship Is a Verb*, 9-10.

⁴⁹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 111.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 104.

⁵¹ Webber, *Worship Is a Verb*, 66.

One of the clearest signs that a church is growing and advancing is that the church leaders and members are deeply committed to prayer. Every church that grows and advances has been a praying church. One of the strangest things in the Christian life is that while most pastors and leaders recognize the importance and the value of prayer, it is still often neglected. Many times it remains only on paper or on a church agenda. And when prayer is neglected in the pastor's or leader's personal life, then this situation will directly affect the church's attitude toward prayer. When a pastor reduces his personal time for prayer, usually the church will reduce the time for prayers during the worship service as well as in the lives of its members. And usually the church's prayer life will not grow beyond that pastor's level.

According to a survey among 80 pastors from Moldova, 54% affirm that a key factor for church growth is prayer. But when they were asked to indicate how they would like to improve in their lives and ministry, only 3% affirmed that they are going to spend more time in prayer. This situation is not just a characteristic of leaders and pastor from a particular region. This is a real problem for every Christian. We know the value of prayer, but we do not value it in practice. Therefore, one of the highest priorities for pastors and leaders is to spend more time in prayer, to preach on prayer, and to challenge every Christian to live a life of prayer. In many churches, pastoral prayer substitutes for personal prayer. It puts all prayers and requests into the mouth of the pastor. But in those churches where prayer has been returned to the people,

each individual is able to pray, to make his or her supplications and thanksgiving known to God.⁵²

White said, "The real mystery about prayer is not unanswered prayer. The real mystery about prayer is unoffered prayer."⁵³ Jesus taught, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (Matt 7:7). The churches that grow and advance are the churches that consistently and faithfully ask, seek, and knock, and they trust that God will answer. John Piper says, "Prayer is the coupling of primary and secondary causes. . . . God loves to bless His people. But even more He loves to do it in answer to prayer."⁵⁴

A church that grows is a church of prayer. David Peterson also indicates that the challenge of many contemporary churches is to give more place to prayer in their public meetings and to encourage congregational members to meet for prayer in a range of contexts outside the formal gathering of the church.⁵⁵ Scripture and prayer are at the heart of every truly healthy church.⁵⁶ Growing churches are praying churches. Every part of our high-speed society wars against prayer, but it is through prayer that we will overcome the powers of the world, the flesh, and Satan. Praying churches will be growing and victorious churches.

⁵² Ibid., 9-10.

⁵³ White, *Healthy Kingdom Churches*, 62.

⁵⁴ John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 53.

⁵⁵ Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 158.

⁵⁶ Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church*, 19.

In a growing church's worship, God takes the central place, and people are confronted with God's holiness and are convicted of their sins and their need to be cleansed, saved, and sanctified. Authentic biblical worship involves the transformation of the worshiper. When the worshiper is confronted with God's Word and his holiness, there is no other option than life transformation. Paul challenges worshipers, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Rom 12:2). Therefore, worship in a growing church becomes the setting in which people are confronted with God's standards and holiness and want to be transformed and sanctified in the likeness of Jesus Christ (Eph 4:11-15; Col 3:9-10).

There are two main reasons why transformation is needed in worship: God's holiness and man's sinful nature (Isa 59:2). Because God is holy, he commands his worshipers to be like him (1 Pet 1:16). Therefore, a clear and right understanding of God's holiness challenges worshipers and makes them aware of their need to be transformed. Therefore, every person who wants to worship God needs the mediation of Jesus Christ (Heb 10:18-22) and needs to prepare himself for worship (Heb 12:24-25). The true worshiper will "draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith" (Heb 10:22; 11:4-6; Matt 5:8).

Worship is where the worshiper is transformed in his relationship with God, the body of Christ, and the world. First, in biblical worship, the worshiper

is challenged to grow in the knowledge of God's love, power, and call (Eph 1:18; 3:19; Phil 1:9-11; 1 Thess 1:15). Second, in biblical worship, the worshiper is challenged to grow in likeness to Christ's character (Eph 4:23-24). Third, in biblical worship, the worshiper is transformed in his relationship with others. A right relationship among the members of the body is the supreme condition for biblical worship and for a church to grow (see Matt 5:23-24). Our attitude toward God will be reflected in our attitude toward members of the church (1 John 4:19-20). In our relationship with the members of the body, we must grow in unity (1 Cor 1:10-17; 12:3, 7) and in love (Rom 12:10; 1 Thess 4:9-10; Heb 13:1-3). Worship calls upon us to respond to others. If in worship we realize the reconciliation we have with the Father, surely this compels us to be reconciled with each other.⁵⁷ Fourth, in biblical worship, the worshiper is transformed in his relationship toward the world. The church as the body of Christ has two perspectives: to come together for worship and then to go out and share their transformed lives (Matt 5:16). Therefore, in a biblical, worshiping church, the worshipers will be empowered to share God's love and his Good News with unsaved people. Even when we are together for worship, that time can become an opportunity for people's lives to be transformed. A growing church understands that evangelism is the natural by-product of authentic worship. When outsiders see Christians genuinely worshiping, they are attracted, and they are transformed.

⁵⁷ Webber, *Worship Is a Verb*, 10.

Worship also becomes a source for spiritual renewal.⁵⁸ When God takes the central place in worship, members of the church should be challenged to get involved in serving others and being a missionary in their homes. As White said, "Worship should provide experiences that the worshiper will never forget as long as he or she lives."⁵⁹

In *Stop Witnessing and Start Loving*, Paul Borthwick confirms this principle: "Worship precedes witness because our testimony to the world overflows from our relationship to Christ. And worship provokes witness because when we're together, we realize that we have glorious good news to share with all people. From our worship we must go out to tell others about the God who loves us so much."⁶⁰

Authentic worship always calls the worshiper to commitment.⁶¹ And a growing church understands that biblical worship costs something. Because God is both subject and object, Christian worship is about offerings or sacrifice. Jesus manifested what worship means in his complete act of sacrifice on the cross. The gift of worship flows from God the subject and returns to God as the object of our reverence.⁶² The Bible says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). When the apostle Paul

⁵⁸ Ibid., 8-9. The author also says that worship is speaking and acting, bringing the benefits of redemption. Through worship, God works on a person's behalf, repairing and renewing the relationship with him. Worship, says Webber, is no longer something we do because of social or peer pressure. Rather, worship is an experience we long to have, a necessary part of our spiritual diet, a central source of our spiritual foundation.

⁵⁹ White, *Healthy Kingdom Churches*, 52.

⁶⁰ Paul Borthwick, *Stop Witnessing and Start Loving* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2003), 111.

⁶¹ Hemphill, *The Antioch Effect*, 48-49.

⁶² Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, 80.

speaks about Christian generosity and giving, he concludes, “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” (2 Cor 9:15). We are asked to give in worship because God gave to us first. Then as a holy priesthood, we are called to offer “spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 2:4-5).

The New Testament mentions a few different types of spiritual sacrifices that Christian worship involves. We will discuss three of them.

First, we are called to worship God with our bodies. “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship” (Rom 12:1). According to this verse, biblical worship is a person’s total response to all that God is. Biblical worship involves a person’s entire being, his heart, mind, abilities, and gifts that have been received from God. Romans 12:1 speaks about continuing, living sacrifice, and Leon Morris says that this worship requires all our being, not just a part of it.⁶³ Stephen Macchia says that this verse means that where we are, everywhere we are, is a place of worship. This is a shift from location to individual.⁶⁴ Therefore, in a growing church, every member is challenged to become part of the body’s worship and not just a consumer and spectator.

Second, we are called to worship God with our material possessions. Worship is our total dedication to God, and we are asked and privileged to worship through our material possessions. The external offering is the result

⁶³ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, 1992), 432-34.

⁶⁴ Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church*, 42.

of an inner offering. Biblical worship will involve a cost. It seems that many people avoid worshiping God because it costs, and costs more than material possessions.

White says that cheerful stewardship is a characteristic of healthy churches. God has a plan for the support of his kingdom: the tithe. If God's people will follow God's plan, there will always be an abundance of resources to do God's work.⁶⁵ Long ago, the prophet Malachi declared, "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,' says the LORD Almighty, 'and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have enough room for it'" (Mal 3:10).

Some Christians disagree, saying that the tithe was part of the Old Testament law. However, Jesus said he did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to fulfill them (Matt 5:17). Jesus taught that we are to give the tithe and offerings (Matt 23:23). He instructed believers to give sacrificially (Matt 16:19-21). The early church practiced giving and stewardship. The apostle Paul reminded the Corinthians that all we have, we received from God (1 Cor 4:7). And he declares, "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever!" (Rom 11:36). In 1 Corinthians 16:2, Paul teaches the church that the first day of the week is the appropriate time to set aside the offering for the Lord. And 2 Corinthians 8 is clear biblical teaching about stewardship in the church.

⁶⁵ White, *Healthy Kingdom Churches*, 123.

Therefore, giving is an act of worship and must be practiced in the church. Paul taught that giving should not be pressured (2 Cor 8:2-3; 9:5-7). The church needs to be taught what the Bible says about stewardship:

- All that we have belongs to God, and we are only stewards of what he gave us (Rom 11:35-36; 1 Cor 4:2).
- God provides for us (1 Tim 6:6-7).
- We are to manage well all that God has given us (Col 3:23-24).
- We are to give regularly and systematically (1 Cor 16:1-2).
- We are to excel in giving (2 Cor 8:7)
- Such worship is pleasing to God (Heb 13:16).

When a church is faithful and responds through giving as an expression of its worship, God will bless that congregation beyond measure. Jesus has promised his followers “Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you” (Luke 6:38). White comments, “This is not a prosperity theology: this is Scripture. It is the promise of God.”⁶⁶

In churches that grow, cheerful stewardship is not an option. It is seen by church members and leadership as a privilege to return what they have received from God. In growing and advancing churches, pastors, leaders, and members have first given themselves to God because, for them, giving is an act of worship.

⁶⁶ White, *Healthy Kingdom Churches*, 127.

Third, we are called to worship God with all our life and being. In a growing church, worship cannot be limited to a specific place or time, because it becomes a lifestyle. The apostle Paul wrote, “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31). Therefore, worship is much more than singing songs to God. Paul told us to offer our “bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God,” saying, “this is your spiritual act of worship” (Rom 12:1). Worship is not something we do one hour a week but a lifestyle that we offer God.

Empowered by the Holy Spirit. In a growing church, worship is empowered by the Holy Spirit of God. Millard Erickson explains in a comprehensive manner that our way to God is opened through Jesus Christ, but the Holy Spirit empowers believers to worship God.⁶⁷ Jesus declared that “a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth” (John 4:23-24). We are born again through the powerful work of the Holy Spirit (John 3). In Romans, Paul writes that those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God (Rom 8:15), and continues, “For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children” (Rom 8:15-16). Therefore, without the work of the Holy Spirit, Christian worship would be just a simple human act, similar to a pagan one. Without the Holy Spirit, the message of Christ would

⁶⁷ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 322-24.

remain merely an idea, but by the empowering of the Holy Spirit, it becomes a divine reality.

The Holy Spirit empowers all the church's worship elements: songs, preaching, prayers, and worship services (1 Cor 6:19-20; 14:36; Rom 8:26-27; Eph 1:13-14; 4:30; Phil 3:3). Where God's Spirit is present, there is place for a large variety of forms and worship styles. Those styles and forms that are guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit are not wrong, because they are the result of the Spirit's work.

The Holy Spirit empowers all the church's worship services. During history we can observe mainly three approaches concerning worship services. First, there are churches that do not plan worship services; they argue that the Holy Spirit leads the program. This tendency was evident in the Corinthian church. Paul says about this attitude, "God is not a God of disorder but peace" (1 Cor 14:33).

The second approach concerning worship in the church is the orthodox approach. These churches tend toward tradition and legalism. There is no place for new forms and styles. They argue that everything new is not biblical, while everything old is good and biblical.

The third approach to worship is the balanced one. This approach involves preparation and planning but also allows the Holy Spirit to bring changes. Since worship involves the praise and adoration of God, it deserves nothing less than the best in planning and execution.⁶⁸ Therefore, in churches that grow, pastors need to assume responsibility to be involved in planning

⁶⁸ White, *Healthy Kingdom Churches*, 46-47.

worship but with the assurance that all those are empowered by the Holy Spirit. Those who plan worship for a congregation each week should take seriously the heart cries of the people of God who are gathering in the sanctuary for one purpose: to meet with the Lord. It requires a lot of prayer and energy to prepare for such events. God-exalting worship is not to be taken lightly by worshipers or worship leaders, pastors or laypeople, older or newer believers, children, youth, or adults. The Father seeks our worship. The style is secondary in importance to the real reason we worship, which is to glorify God.⁶⁹

The Holy Spirit empowers all the church's worship styles. There is a temptation for churches to become concerned with a specific form or style of worship, but styles or forms are not the key factor in church growth. Whether the worship services are so-called seeker services, or are liturgical, or are in between, the key issue is whether the Holy Spirit is at work in the services.⁷⁰ Cultural diversity is growing within local churches, especially between generations, and it is becoming increasingly difficult for leaders to minister adequately to the entire body of believers. In any case, in the New Testament gives several principles that should govern each forms or styles of worship. The apostle Paul emphasized in Ephesians 5:18-19 that music in the church is to be the product of the Spirit's filling.⁷¹ We sing to God more than we do about God, regardless of the style of music that ushers us into his presence.

⁶⁹ Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church*, 47.

⁷⁰ Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development* (Emmelshull, Germany: C&P Publishing, 2000), 30-31.

⁷¹ Getz Gene and Joe Wall, *Effective Church Growth Strategies* (Nashville: World Publishing, 2000), 103.

Every aspect of the worship service is to be a vertical expression of love and adoration for his glory and to God alone.⁷²

The Holy Spirit empowers all the church's worship renewal.

Throughout church history, there have always been pastors and church leaders who truly desired worship renewal. Today, we observe a high interest among church leaders for worship that will attract and inspire more people.

And that is not a bad desire. In fact, that is a biblical desire. In 1 Corinthians 14, the apostle Paul speaks about this issue.⁷³ But, as Webber says, we need to recognize that the Holy Spirit brings worship renewal. "Good worship does not happen because we decide to make it better, more interesting, or more relevant. No! Good worship depends on divine favor, an action 'from above.'"⁷⁴ Authentic spiritual direction flows from the act of worship. It is God with whom we have to do, always.⁷⁵ Change and renewal in worship will not happen easily and quickly, and there are different problems and obstacles. In some churches, growth is stunted because people do not want to change any of the present traditions. We must recognize that sometimes the leaders are afraid that change will get out of hand and that the nature and character of the church they pastor will be altered by those changes. And many people like

⁷² Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church*, 4.

⁷³ Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 195. Commenting on 1 Corinthians 14:24-25, Peterson says that the worship described is an act of submission and unconditional surrender to God, similar to the spontaneous response of the people in the Old Testament when confronted by God (e.g., Gen 24:26-27; Exod 4:31; 34:8). Such language suggests the conversion of the unbeliever, thus fulfilling prophesies such as Isaiah 45:14, describing the nations coming to pay homage to Israel's God. Although the conversion of an unbeliever in the course of a church service is much desired, evangelism is not the primary purpose of the gathering, according to 1 Corinthians 14.

⁷⁴ Webber, *Worship Is a Verb*, 15.

⁷⁵ Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, 193.

passive worship. They do not want to become involved in worship and bring themselves as a living sacrifice to God (Rom12:1). It is easier to be a spectator of a well-prepared worship service.

But many church leaders desire, pray, and look for a renewal in worship. As Webber says, “God has called us to worship him, and worship him throughout all eternity is what we will do. Perhaps now is the best time to begin experiencing worship in the corporate community of our local churches. Let’s break through the passive mold of being observers or recipients. Let’s become active participants and doers. Let’s discover that worship is a verb.”⁷⁶

As the Household of God, the Church Is Called to Fellowship

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

—Acts 2:42

One of the greatest signs of authentic church growth is unity (John 17:20-21). And where there is no unity, there is no fellowship or authentic growth. Therefore, church growth has to do directly with the way church members treat one another. According to a survey among pastors from Moldova, 69% of them consider that good fellowship in the church is a key factor for church growth. Most of them agree that lack of love and unity, hatred, and unresolved conflicts are significant obstacles to church growth. But when the same group of pastors answered a question about what they want to improve in their churches, only 15% of them expressed their

⁷⁶ Webber, *Worship Is a Verb*, 219.

willingness and desire to improve unity among church leaders and members. This survey reveals we all know the value of an authentic fellowship, but few people are willing to work hard to have that kind of fellowship. Also, the survey emphasizes that lack of authentic love in many churches is a key problem for many Christians.

Churches that grow and advance continuously express their love for the Lord and their love for each other. In such churches, it is easy to feel God's love and unity. Love and unity are two major factors for healthy fellowship in the church. It is easy to observe that when leaders and members of a church love God, they love each other and express love to their visitors.⁷⁷

A growing, biblical church is not only about reaching people, it is about keeping them in a divine fellowship as well. Biblical fellowship is one of the keys to church growth. Robinson says that a church will never grow beyond its fellowship. If the fellowship is right, the church will continue to minister, witness in love, and be built up in maturity and in number. But if fellowship is not right, the church will decline and eventually die. If the fellowship is right, the church can work through any problem and continue to grow. But if the fellowship is disrupted, everything else goes down. Attendance will drop. Giving will decrease. Outreach will stop. Building the fellowship is crucial to the growth of a church.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ The author remembers well his first visit to Grace Chapel Church in Lexington, Massachusetts. A little boy was standing near the central door and told him, "Welcome to our church." The author does not remember the message that was preached that morning, but he remembers the Christian love from that boy. In this growing, healthy church, leaders and members care not only for themselves but for their visitors as well. That is a powerful Christian testimony.

⁷⁸ Darrell W. Robinson, *Total Church Life* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 42.

The Importance of Fellowship for Church Growth

The Bible teaches that we need each other for a host of reasons.

Together, we make up the whole that is the body of Christ. Our corporate worship brings us together before God in a way that individual worship cannot. We have varied gifts. All these reasons mandate our participation in Christian fellowship. God created us to crave relationship with him and each other. Some of the benefits in a true community are strength, wisdom, accountability, and acceptance.⁷⁹ Paul Borthwick presents five reasons why we need each other:

- We need each other's encouragement (Heb.3:13).
- We grow stronger through corporate prayer (Acts 4:5-22; 4:24; 2:29; 2:31; 5:1-41). Corporate prayer leads to corporate boldness. Turning our attention upward reminds us of who is in charge in the world: our sovereign Creator God. It reminds us of how he brings forth his purposes, even through hardship. And it puts us in the position of intentional dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit.
- Corporate worship and growth together assure us that we are not alone. We need the fellowship of other Christians because the needs and challenges of the world overwhelm us. We need to know that we're part of a bigger team, God's team.⁸⁰
- We need others to recharge our spiritual batteries (Eph 6:12).

⁷⁹ Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 38-43.

⁸⁰ Borthwick, *Stop Witnessing and Start Loving*, 109-11.

- Our corporate fellowship cleans us up to send us out again.

Christian fellowship is the place where I confess my sins and re-align my purposes with the purposes of God.⁸¹

Bill Donahue argues that we need fellowship for a span of care and because everyone needs connection, no one can do everything, all are members of one body,⁸² each part must do its work, and for the beauty of the whole.⁸³ Paul explains the foundation of the church's unity:

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. (Eph 4:1-7)

Paul's emphasis is upon unity, not uniformity. White says that unity speaks of being together, whereas uniformity speaks of being alike. We are not alike.⁸⁴ The church of Christ is one body and has one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, and one baptism. It must keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. That is why unity is not an option but is an imperative for growing churches.

⁸¹ Ibid., 112.

⁸² Donahue and Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups*, 49. Because we are members of one body, each with a part to play, the church cannot become what Christ intends unless each member accepts responsibility.

⁸³ Ibid., 50. In Ephesians 4, Paul argues that the church cannot function as Christ intends unless it works as a body. As all members work toward unity, harnessing their gifts for the common good, individual members experience transformed lives (Eph 4:3-7, 11-16).

⁸⁴ White, *Healthy Kingdom Churches*, 115.

The Meaning of Biblical Fellowship

When we speak about fellowship, one Greek word needs to be analyzed, and this word is *koinonia*. In the New Testament the word *koinonia* involves more than one meaning: union, communion, participation, partnership, to share, to know, and to communicate.⁸⁵ This word incorporates two main meanings: first, to participate together or to have a relationship and not an activity (1 John 1:3); and second, to share with, in the sense of sharing and giving to others what we have.

Robinson argues that biblical fellowship within any church is twofold: a vertical fellowship with God and a horizontal fellowship with others.⁸⁶ As God's children, we have the privilege of having fellowship with God (1 John 1:6-7). And our fellowship with God depends on his faithfulness to his children. Our fellowship with God affects directly our fellowship with one another. If our fellowship with God is right, then our fellowship with one another must be right. But if our fellowship with God is not right, then our fellowship with one another will be wrong. The foundation for a healthy church fellowship is God's fellowship (1 John 1:3-7). There is a common goal among believers—to glorify Christ and to spend eternity with him. There is a common lifestyle and a common sacrifice—we have given up time, money, and some pleasures of the world for something we agree is greater. Common worldviews, habits, and traditions bind us.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the First Epistle of Corinthians* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1959), 10-11.

⁸⁶ Robinson, *Total Church Life*, 43.

⁸⁷ Russell, *When God Builds a Church*, 197.

Therefore, biblical fellowship for a growing church is not an option; it is a divine condition for the church to be God's church. In fact, as Warren says, the church exists to provide fellowship for believers.⁸⁸ By our nature, as members of God's family we crave an intimate and meaningful fellowship with one another.

The Nature of Biblical Fellowship in a Growing Church

Centered in Christ. One of the greatest needs of church fellowship is to establish Christ as the center of it. This need is based on two main principles.

First, Jesus Christ is the one who commands church fellowship. Before he was arrested, Jesus told his disciples, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34-35). Church growth occurs when the followers of Christ carry out this new commandment.

In his prayer for the disciples, Jesus said, "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:20-21). When a local church follows Christ's command, the members will experience divine love and unity. And these kinds of love communities become one of the most important witnesses to unbelievers.

⁸⁸ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 106.

Second, Jesus Christ is the agent and source of church fellowship. The apostle Paul claims, “For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again” (2 Cor 5:14-15). In Ephesians, Paul challenges us to “remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ” (Eph 2:12-13). As a result, “Through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, we are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (Eph 2:18-19). And Paul concludes, “In him the whole building is joined together and rises⁸⁹ to become a holy temple in the Lord” (Eph 2:21). From these passages we could conclude that where there is no Christ, there is no authentic fellowship, and thus there is no church growth. We belong to the family of God, and in him we grow together. Larry Crabb also argues that the church is a community of people on a journey to God. Wherever there is supernatural togetherness and Spirit-directed movement, there is the church—a spiritual community.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ In the King James Version, the word is “growth.”

⁹⁰ Larry Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 21.

One of the images used in the New Testament to describe the church is that of the body of Christ (see, e.g., 1 Cor 12:27). As a congregation, we are not a body of Christ but the body of Christ. The metaphor stresses the relationships and responsibilities of the members of Christ to one another.⁹¹ Christians are still the body of Christ when they are not meeting, but their special relationship to one another and to the Lord finds practical expression when they gather together in his name.⁹²

Therefore, a growing church understands the value and the importance of being together. No one member can say that there is no need to belong to a local church, because Paul says, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!'" (1 Cor 12:21). And Paul explains, "in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be" (1 Cor 12:18). As Christians, says Warren, we are called to belong, not just to believe.⁹³

Much can be made of the imagery of the body to stress the importance of meeting together for fellowship and mutual ministry. We come to give and to receive, and thus to take our part in the edification of the church, which is the continuing work of God with his people (Rom 14:19-20). But congregational meetings should demonstrate both the truths conveyed by the image. Christians are mutually dependent on one another, and they are collectively dependent on Jesus Christ for life and power. We meet together

⁹¹ Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 208.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 105.

to benefit from the relationships and ministries we can share with one another.⁹⁴

Fellowship among members of the body of Christ is not an option but a necessary element that expresses the original design of the church. The New Testament teaches:

- love one another (John 13:34-35; Rom 13:8; 1 John 3:11)
- confess sins and pray for one another (Jas 5:16)
- care for one another (Rom 12:25; 1 Cor 12:24-25)
- greet one another (Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20; 1 Pet 5:14)
- bear one another's burdens⁹⁵ (Gal 6:2)
- encourage and build up one another (1 Thess 5:11; Heb 3:13; 10:25)
- submit to one another (Eph 5:21)
- bear with each other and forgive (Eph 4:2; Col 3:13)
- admonish one another (Rom 15:14; Col 3:16)
- serve one another in love (Gal 5:13)
- spur one another on toward love and good deeds (Heb 10:24)
- accept one another (Rom 15:7)

⁹⁴ Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 208.

⁹⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York Harper San Francisco, 1954), 100-101. In his comments on this passage, Bonhoeffer says that a Christian must bear the burden of his brother and suffer and endure the brother. The burden of man was so heavy for God that he had to endure the cross. God bore the burden of men in the body of Jesus Christ. But he bore them as a mother carries her child, as a shepherd enfolds the lost lamb that has been found. God took men upon himself, and they weighted him to the ground, but God remained with them and they with God. In bearing with men, God maintained fellowship with them. It is the law of Christ that was fulfilled in the cross. And Christians must share in this law. They must suffer their brethren, but, now that the law of Christ has been fulfilled, they can bear with their brethren.

- be kind to one another (Eph 4:32)
- pray for one another (Jas 5:16)
- offer hospitality to one another (1 Pet 4:9)
- fellowship with one another (1 John 1:7)

Because we are members of one body, each with a part to play, the church cannot become what Christ intends unless each member accepts responsibility. For the church to be the church, each person must participate.⁹⁶ The reason, as Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, is that God sees us as members of the body. In 1 Corinthians 12:14-27, Paul describes the absurdity of Christians viewing themselves as individuals related only to Christ, not to each other. Unless each person accepts responsibility and treats the other parts with respect, the whole body suffers. Before and after this description of Christ's church as members of one body, Paul writes about various spiritual gifts, each "given for the common good" (1 Cor 12:7). When each part of the body does its work, spiritual gifts can have a massive effect on church ministry. When each member accepts responsibility, then the church can do Christ's work in the world.⁹⁷ The members may of necessity be scattered over the surface of the earth and separated by distance and circumstances, but in every true member of the church is the homing instinct and the longing of the sheep for the fold and for the shepherd.⁹⁸ The church cannot function as God intends unless people see

⁹⁶ Donahue and Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups*, 49.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 50.

⁹⁸ Warren W. Wiersbe, comp., *The Best of A. W. Tozer* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1984), 65.

themselves as members of one body. Each part must take responsibility so that Christ's body can do its work in the world. Only when everyone works together will each life be transformed.⁹⁹

When we are in right fellowship¹⁰⁰ with the body of Christ, Macchia says, "we will discover that when the hard times come our way, we are not left to stand alone. In crisis moments, when it feels like our world are spinning out of control or the bottom is dropping out, we can cling to one another and find hope and joy for journey. That is what Christian community is supposed to look like."¹⁰¹

Grounded in God's Word. The foundation of authentic fellowship will always be based on God's Word. Scripture indicates explicitly that the early church was devoted to fellowship and the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42-47). This passage refers to four relational activities.

First, the believers ate together. "Breaking bread" sometimes was not a communion service but eating a meal together. On occasions, these meals were called "love feasts" (Jude 12; 2 Pet 2:13). Before Jesus faced the cross, he had a love feast with his disciples. The essence of this experience was fellowship with each other as they ate together and fellowship with Christ as they recalled his death.¹⁰² This is to be an experience of fellowship with each other and with God.

⁹⁹ Donahue and Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups*, 45.

¹⁰⁰ Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth*, 11. Crabb also argues that a central task of a church is to create a place that is safe enough for the walls to be torn down, for each of us to own and reveal our brokenness. Only then can community be used of God to restore our souls.

¹⁰¹ Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church*, 87.

¹⁰² Getz and Wall, *Effective Church Growth Strategies*, 46.

Second, the early believers devoted themselves to prayer together. Among New Testament believers, prayer was usually a corporate experience in the context of human relationships (Rom 12:10-13; 1 Thess 5:14-18, Jas 5:13-16; 1 Pet 4:7-10).

Third, the early believers shared their material possessions. This kind of generosity was both a human and divine experience. It was human in that these believers were caring for each other's physical needs. It was divine in that anything that was given to meet the needs of a brother or a sister in Christ was blessed by him.¹⁰³ Jesus had said, "And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward" (Matt 10:42).

Fourth, the early Christians praised God together (Acts 2:47). Fellowship is a key factor when a church worships God. Paul emphasizes the importance of praise when we are together (see Col 3:16; Eph 5:18-19). One again, we should note that when a church experiences authentic fellowship, God will make that church grow, both spiritually and numerically. Also, one factor that contributed to authentic fellowship was persecution, which challenged the first Christians to stay close together. In other words, the pressure of outside opposition helped them to have a solid fellowship among believers.

Until 1990, the churches in the former Soviet Union faced opposition and persecution. But a hallmark of those churches was their strong fellowship. Their fellowship, unity, and love for each other were known even

¹⁰³ Ibid., 49-50.

by communist leaders. Robinson says that when the fellowship stays true, external opposition serves to strengthen it. It binds the people of God closer to one another and closer to God.¹⁰⁴

Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples” (John 8:31). In other words, authentic fellowship flows from the living Word of God. Remaining in the Word is the supreme and divine condition for authentic fellowship, as well for church growth.

Empowered by the Holy Spirit. If Christ’s love compels us, then we can say that the Holy Spirit empowers and keeps unity and fellowship in the church. In his epistle to the Ephesians, Paul urges Christians to live a life worthy of the calling they have received: “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit” (Eph 4:2-4).

The apostle Paul explains to the Corinthians that “no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:3). Then he says, “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit” (1 Cor.12:4). And “the body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (1 Cor 12:12-13). Therefore, Paul concludes, “the body is not made up of one part but of many” (1 Cor 12:14).

¹⁰⁴ Robinson, *Total Church Life*, 48.

In his final greetings in the second epistle to the Corinthians, Paul writes, "Finally, brothers, good-by. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints send their greetings. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Cor 13:11-14).

All of these passages emphasize the divine role of God's Spirit. Only by the empowering of the Holy Spirit can we, who are many and different, come together and belong to one body (Eph 4:4). Only through the Holy Spirit we are able to experience authentic fellowship that flows from God.

People have an innate desire to belong, to know, to be known, and to be sheltered. At the beginning of the Bible, God says, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen 2:18). Healthy churches are committed to building community relationships. We will never build community if we allow people to remain isolated spectators in an audience. They must become members of the family. The church has the opportunity to reach and assimilate vast numbers of hurting and lonely people if we truly become the family we are called to be.¹⁰⁵

A church cannot go forward when fellowship is disrupted. A church has only so much energy, time, and gifts. If these are consumed by internal strife and negativity, there will no energy left for ministry and witness.¹⁰⁶ In a church with broken fellowship, people usually consume their energy, gifts, and time

¹⁰⁵ Hemphill, *The Antioch Effect*, 105.

¹⁰⁶ Robinson, *Total Church Life*, 51.

not with the worship, discipleship, evangelism, or counseling but with strife in the church.

Authentic fellowship is related to church growth. Therefore, divisions in a local church hobble its ministry and prevent or restrict growth.¹⁰⁷ It is time to build the church, a community of people who take refuge in God and encourage each other to never flee to another source of help; a community of people who know that the only way to live in this world is to focus on our life with God and others. Our impact on the world is at stake.¹⁰⁸

In 1 John 4:19-21 it is said, “We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.” According to this passage, we can say that a local church becomes the visible entity through which we can test and prove our true love for God and for one another. God has called us to live the Christian life together, as our mutual love and care reflect the love and care of God. In the world, relationships imply commitment; surely they imply no less in the church. We are to bring God glory by an authentic fellowship. This display is our awesome responsibility and our tremendous privilege.

As the Bride of Christ, the Church Is Called to Discipleship

Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ. It remains an abstract idea, a myth which has a

¹⁰⁷ Getz and Wall, *Effective Church Growth Strategies*, 108.

¹⁰⁸ Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth*, 20.

place for the Fatherhood of God, but omits Christ as the living Son. . . . There is trust in God, but no following of Christ.

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer

In the last fifteen years, evangelism has been a priority for most evangelical churches in Eastern Europe. And God has blessed this part of the world in an extraordinary and mighty way. For example, in 1990, there were about ten thousand members in Moldova's Baptist churches. Since 1990, God has added more than ten thousand new believers. And the churches are still growing. But because churches are preoccupied with evangelism and bringing new people, discipleship has been neglected or has not developed as should be.¹⁰⁹ The church can be distracted from its divine purposes by many good activities, but for a local church to grow and advance, discipleship is a must.

The Importance of Discipleship for Church Growth

The mandate for discipleship comes directly from the Lord Jesus, who said to his disciples, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt 28:18-20).

¹⁰⁹ According to a survey of more than 80 pastors from Moldova, 23% of them indicated that discipleship is a key factor for church growth. Lack of discipleship was not mentioned as an obstacle for church growth by anyone. And finally, when pastors were asked about their intentions for the future, nothing was mentioned about discipleship.

To be a disciple is a divine call for every follower of Jesus. Thus, growing and healthy churches should place a high priority on promoting the growth of people toward Christ-likeness, which is the fundamental issue of the disciplining ministry of the church.¹¹⁰ The Great Commission bids the church to be involved in the process of making disciples, which means they must embrace both evangelistic activity and ministry that leads believers to maturity. Authentic evangelism necessitates the assimilation of new believers into the church; assimilation, in turn, requires discipleship, which ultimately leads to effective evangelism. The assimilation process is the crucial balancing point between going and teaching. When a church takes seriously the Great Commission, it will develop a balanced strategy that includes evangelism, assimilation, and teaching. These three facets of discipleship will continually feed each other.¹¹¹

The Meaning of Biblical Discipleship

The words *disciple* and *to disciple* are found in all four Gospels and in the book of Acts (Acts 6:1, 2, 7; 9:1, 10; 13:52; 15:10). In the apostolic church, discipleship usually took place in the context of a church. The process of helping believers to become mature, committed followers of Christ and the process of developing spiritual leaders is taught in the Epistles. We observe this process of discipling with Paul and Timothy, Paul and Titus, and Barnabas and Mark.

¹¹⁰ Hemphill, *The Antioch Effect*, 181.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 182-83.

The apostle Paul emphasizes that the main goal of teaching and preaching is that we may present everyone perfect (mature) in Christ Jesus (Col 1:28). In Ephesians, Paul explains the role of leaders in discipleship. He declares that different spiritual gifts have been given to the body of Christ. “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people to works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:11-13).

According to the New Testament, true church growth does not mean simply adding disciples to the body of Christ. A careful study of the Great Commission presents a much larger vision for truly biblical discipleship. In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus commanded his disciples to make more disciples, baptize those new disciples, and then teach them to obey everything he had taught them. In Mark 16:5, Jesus exhorted his followers to preach the gospel to everyone. In Luke 24:46-49, Jesus reminded his disciples that they were to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem.

The Great Commission includes three major elements.

First, the Great Commission is christocentric; that is, it is centered in Christ and his authority. Jesus introduced this commission by declaring, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matt 28:18). Jesus is the Lord of universe, and we have been commissioned to bring people under

his authority. Gene Getz and Joe Wall say that this truth requires a strategy that includes not only evangelism but also the establishment of churches in which believers can be taught how to follow Jesus Christ as their Lord.¹¹²

Second, the Great Commission focuses on the making of disciples. What does discipleship mean? In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus used four verbs to summarize our mandate from him: go, make disciples, baptize, and teach; and all but “make disciples” are participles. The primary focus, then, is on making disciples. The Greek term for disciple is *mathetes*,¹¹³ which can be translated “apprentice” or “learner.” In other words, a disciple is a “committed follower-learner.” The term suggests dependence and obedience.¹¹⁴

Third, a major element in the Great Commission is the inclusion of two additional injunctions: to baptize and teach all that Christ has commanded. In the Greek, “make disciples” is an imperative, followed by two present participles, “baptizing” and “teaching.” The participles indicate the means by which disciples are to be made. When a person becomes a follower of Christ, that person is to be baptized, thus showing that he or she has become a disciple of Christ. Then the believer grows as a disciple by being continually taught all of Jesus’ commands.¹¹⁵

Acts 2:41-47 demonstrates that discipleship is a process, not an event. Commenting this passage, Hemphill argues that the process of discipleship involves several factors if it is to be balanced.

¹¹² Getz and Wall, *Effective Church Growth Strategies*, 12.

¹¹³ A *mathetes* was one who submitted to a master of a particular craft or a teacher of a particular view of life in order to learn from him.

¹¹⁴ Getz and Wall, *Effective Church Growth Strategies*, 13.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 13-14.

- They added the converts to the body (v. 41). Biblical discipleship requires attachment to the Body of Christ through the means of local church family. Thus a first step in discipleship is incorporating a new convert into the body of Christ.
- They devoted themselves to apostolic teaching (v. 42). Discipleship involves cognitive learning, particularly of strong doctrinal teaching.
- They devoted themselves to one another in biblical fellowship (vv. 42, 44-47). Discipleship is based upon producing healthy believers in the context of healthy relationships.
- They devoted themselves to worship (vv. 42, 27). Praise, the breaking of bread, meeting in the temple, and prayer are essential to discipleship.
- They continued to emphasize outreach (v. 47).¹¹⁶

According to the New Testament, to be a disciple is not an option but a natural expression for each believer. In the first century, when a church was formed, it was assumed that its members were disciples (Acts 11:26). Disciples of Jesus are those who are learning to be like him. That is, they are learning to lead their life as he would lead their life if he were they.

The Nature of Biblical Discipleship in a Growing Church

Centered in Christ. Growing churches understand that Jesus must be at the center of discipleship. He is the great Master and Teacher. He spent

¹¹⁶ Hemphill, *The Antioch Effect*, 184-85.

most of his life teaching and helping his followers to become authentic disciples, and finally he commanded them to go into the world and make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:19-20). Therefore, authentic discipleship is christocentric rather than anthropocentric. In a healthy, growing church people are attracted to Jesus, not to a specific pastor or leader. People are challenged to have a personal relationship with the great Master and not just to be Christians in name only.

Authentic discipleship is Christ-centered because Jesus is the Master. Jesus said to his disciples, “A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master” (Matt 10:24-25). These and other instructions were given to the disciples so they could grow and discover what it means to be a follower of Christ.¹¹⁷

Authentic discipleship is Christ-centered because its ultimate goal is to become like Jesus. The New Testament is clear that God’s will for every believer is spiritual maturity (Eph 4:14). The ultimate goal of spiritual growth is to become like Jesus. God’s plan for us since the beginning has been for us to be like Jesus (Rom 8:28). God wants every believer to develop the character of Christ.¹¹⁸ The growth of the church toward Christ-likeness takes place by confessing and preaching the truth that Christ has revealed. As the church has “received” Christ, so it should “continue to live in him, rooted and

¹¹⁷ Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church*, 80.

¹¹⁸ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 331.

built up in him, strengthened in the faith” as taught by the apostles (Col 2:6-7; Eph 4:20-24).¹¹⁹

Authentic discipleship is Christ-centered because apart from Christ we can do nothing (John 15:5). Therefore, an authentic disciple’s journey is from him, through him, and for him (Rom 11:36).

Grounded in the Word of God. One important factor that makes the church grow spiritually and numerically is following the Word of God. Jesus said to those who had believed him, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31; see also Matt 28:19-20). The supreme condition for being a disciple of Christ is to remain grounded in his Word. Only the word of God can change people and bring them to Jesus. That is why one of the church’s main goals must be teaching the Word of God.

According to a survey among 80 pastors and leaders in Moldova, 7% of them indicated that church growth occurs when there exists healthy biblical teaching and preaching of the Word of God. Jesus wants his church to grow and advance, and a church will grow through instruction in the Word of God (1 Pet 2:2).

There is no substitute for preaching and teaching the gospel of Christ. The Word of God not only provides growth and church health but also is the power of God that helps Christians to grow spiritually and become more like Christ. No church can grow and advance without teaching and preaching the

¹¹⁹ Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 209-10.

Word of God. Therefore, pastors must avoid the temptation to preach messages that serve only to make people feel good. Paul told Timothy:

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry. (2 Tim 4:1-5)

Growing churches understand that only through the Word of God can people be attracted to Jesus. Therefore, biblical preaching and teaching are key factors in church growth. At times, preachers have been tempted to dilute the preaching and teaching of the Word of God. Many times we can hear jokes, stories, and personal opinions in worship services, but few Bible truths. However, Jesus makes it clear that we are called to preach his Good News. Only God's Word can feed the soul (Matt 4:4), and only God's Word can produce spiritual growth (Eph 4:14-16).

Church growth does not take place where discipleship has been replaced with information. Today, too many sermons and Bible studies simply bring information for the auditorium. But in churches that grow, the teaching of God's Word is central, and it changes lives to Christ-likeness. As Paul exclaims, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking,

correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17).

Growing churches understand that only the Word of God is able to sanctify the followers of Christ. When Jesus was praying for his disciples, he said, “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:15-17).

Empowered by the Holy Spirit. The process of growth to Christ-like maturity is one through which we need to patiently walk in the context of community because it is impossible to experience any kind of significant growth on our own.¹²⁰ Macchia argues that a healthy disciple understands that the passages that speak of care for one another are not optional for the Christian life. They are community-building mandates from God to his people.¹²¹

For the church to be able to fulfill its tasks, the empowering work of the Holy Spirit is indispensable for authentic discipleship.

The New Testament is full of references that explain the Holy Spirit’s work. First, we learn from Jesus’ words to his disciples that one of the Holy Spirit’s works is to teach and remind us all God’s Word. “The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you” (John 14:26). Only

¹²⁰ Stephen A. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Disciple* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 95.

¹²¹ Ibid., 96.

through God's Spirit can we understand what God has freely given us (1 Cor 2:12).

Second, another of the Holy Spirit's tasks is to guide us into all God's truth. In John 16:13, Jesus says, "When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come." And the apostle Paul emphasizes that those Christians who live by the Spirit will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature but will have the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:16-22).

Third, the Holy Spirit's presence in us is the divine mark of an authentic disciple. The apostle Paul declares, "And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ" (Rom 8:9). He goes on to explain that "those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father'" (Rom 8:14-15).

Fourth, the Holy Spirit empowers preaching. When Paul writes to the church at Thessalonica, he tells them, "For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction" (1 Thess 1:4-5).

And finally, according to Jesus, one of the main tasks of authentic discipleship process is to baptize believers in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are then to teach them to obey what he has commanded (Matt 28:19-20). These passages and many others highlight the divine and

indispensable work of the Holy Spirit throughout the process of discipleship. Growing churches understand that authentic discipleship is empowered by the Holy Spirit.

In conclusion, we agree with Macchia that becoming a healthy disciple or a church is a lifelong journey. We will not ever arrive at the fullest picture of what God requires of us. Discipleship is apprenticeship, and the Master does not expect perfection but only the development of skill that leads to a deeper relationship along the way. We will fall short of his glory, and we will disappoint him more often than we care to imagine. But the awesome love of the Lord for all his disciples—past, present, and future—is unfathomable, undeniable, unconditional, indestructible, and incredible.¹²² Authentic discipleship in a growing church does not mean simply bringing more people into a building but bringing Christ's character in their hearts. As Willard says, we should be preoccupied to get heaven into people rather than people in heaven.¹²³ The building up of the body of Christ is to take place until we all attain unity of faith and the fullness of Christ. David Peterson says that the purpose of the Christian gathering is to prepare the saints to meet their Lord. All ministries should have this eschatological focus and perspective.¹²⁴

As his followers, we must remember Jesus' Great Commission. Therefore, for a growing church, discipleship is a divine command and not a human option. If a church stops making disciples according to the Lord's

¹²² Ibid., 14. In this book, Macchia writes about ten traits exhibited by Christians who seek to grow as disciples.

¹²³ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 239.

¹²⁴ Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 209.

teaching, that church neglects one the greatest commands of Jesus Christ, and that church cannot grow.

As the Body of Christ, the Church Is Called to Service

The essence of the Christian ministry is that its success is not within our reach. God's purpose is that we get the joy of service, but that He gets the glory.

—John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals*

One of the greatest desires of a pastor is to see all members involved in different church ministries. However, this is a difficult task to accomplish. And this is true for several different reasons. First, church leaders do not take enough time to help church members discover their gifts for ministry. There is not an adequate process through which church members discover their gifts. Second, many members are ready to serve, but they do not know what to do. And third, some members feel comfortable doing nothing. We have probably all heard pastors complaining about members' indifference. This is not a new problem. In New Testament times, some church members were ignorant about spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:1) while others were abusing them recklessly (1 Cor 14:23). But our responsibility, says Gilbert Bilezikian, is to present clear teaching about spiritual gifts so that all members have the opportunity to discover, develop, and deploy their gifts and thus participate in the ministries of the church. Ignorance about spiritual gifts is a major reason for church dysfunction, but it is not the only one.¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Gilbert Bilezikian, *Community 101* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 80-81.

According to a survey among pastors in Moldova, 90% of the pastors indicated that members' indifference, lack of dedication, passivity, and lack of involvement are obstacles to church growth. A great need of the local church is to help its members to discover their gifts and then to encourage them to serve, because to serve God is an honor, a privilege, and a command.

The Importance of Ministry for Church Growth

According to the New Testament, to serve God is not an optional task for followers of Christ. Service is not restricted to those who have been called to lead in the church. According to New Testament teaching, to serve is an act of unselfishness and a living sacrifice for those who have tasted the goodness of God. After Paul speaks about God's mercies, he challenges every Christian in the church in Rome to present themselves as living, holy sacrifices, acceptable unto God (Rom 12:1). Paul also reminds us that "we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building" (1 Cor 3:9).

The Meaning of Church Ministry

Many passages in the New Testament explain the meaning of church ministry, and one of them is Ephesians 4:11-13. The apostle Paul says, "It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become

mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." From this passage flow a few basic principles.

First, God gives ministries according to his will (Eph 4:11). There are different gifts and more than one leader. Bilezikian notes that according to the New Testament, "leadership is a servant ministry, based on spiritual gifts and always plural."¹²⁶

Second, God has clear expectations of those who have been called to ministry. The primary expectation is "to prepare God's people for works of service" (Eph 4:12). In other words, the role of leaders is to help members to identify their gifts and integrate them into appropriate ministries.¹²⁷ The New Testament teaches that each believer (member of the body) has at least one spiritual gift (1 Pet 4:10-11). Therefore, every member of the body of Christ needs to be involved in the process of maturing others into Christ-likeness, and certain gifts in the body equip them to do that (Eph 4:11-16). That is why it is so important to encourage all members to discover what their gifts are and how they can be used most effectively in the body of Christ. Each believer has at least one such gift, and no one may be excused or excluded from this responsibility (1 Cor 12:6, 15, 21).

Third, God has specific goals within church ministry (Eph 4:12-13). And in Ephesians 4:14-15, Paul says, "Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.

¹²⁶ Ibid.,130; see also 130-86, where the author discusses all these components of leadership.

¹²⁷ Getz and Wall, *Effective Church Growth Strategies*, 99.

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.”

The Nature of Biblical Ministry in a Growing Church

Centered in Christ. Church ministry is Christ-centered because “From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Eph 4:16). Apart from him we can do nothing (John 15:4-5). Ephesians 2:10 teaches that “we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” In Romans 11:36, Paul concludes “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever!” By serving him, we cannot surprise God with any ministry, because all the gifts we have for ministry are from him. The ministry he calls us to accomplish is only though him. Therefore, all that we do must be accomplished only for his glory.

Church ministry is Christ-centered because Jesus is the head of the body. No human is ever designated in Scripture as sole leader of a church or as its head. That headship belongs to Christ alone. But even Christ does not appeal to his headship to claim authority over his church. The Scriptures consistently present his headship with regard to the church as a servant function, whereby he provides the church with fullness (Eph 1:22-23), growth (Eph 4:15-16), salvation (Eph 5:23), a beginning (Col 1:18), fullness in him, the Creator head of every power (Col 2:9-10; cf. Col 1:16), and growth that

finds its source in God (Col 2:19). Since Christ submits himself in servant headship as Savior of the church, in return the church submits itself to Christ (Eph 5:23-24). Christ treats the church as his bride, never as his slave. Likewise, church leaders must treat the faithful as fellow servants, never as subordinates.¹²⁸

Church ministry is Christ-centered because Jesus was the greatest leader to ever walk on this earth.¹²⁹ He led by his servant attitude. He came to this earth not to be ministered to, but to minister and to give his life a ransom (Mark 10:45). The apostle Paul describes this servant attitude of Jesus (Phil 2:8-8). If we would comprehend Jesus' perspective on ministry, then we must recognize that he led by example (see John 13:15). Therefore, being a servant leader is essential for a minister. White explains that a pastor must not lord it over staff or church members. Rather, he must jump down into the muddy trenches to be there with his congregation in their worst days as well as their best days. He must be there for his staff, heavily involved in shouldering the responsibilities with them, not simply barking orders.¹³⁰

The disciples argued among themselves as to “who was the greatest” (Mark 9:33-34). In other words, they were in competition with each other for the position of frontrunner in the kingdom of Jesus Christ. But Jesus said, “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all” (Mark 9:35). Bilezikian says that Jesus did not condemn as wrong the desire to be the first. Leaders are needed, and the desire to use one’s gift of

¹²⁸ Bilezikian, *Community 101*, 166.

¹²⁹ White, *Healthy Kingdom Churches*, 76.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 78.

leadership is legitimate. But Jesus transformed the concept of leadership by redefining its style and motivation. The style demands that roles of leadership be fulfilled not with the pride of one who comes first or the self-glory of one who wins a competition but with the humility of one who comes in last. The motivation should not be a desire to rule, control, or command but to support and assist others, just as a servant does.¹³¹ There is no command or instruction in the New Testament for any Christian to exercise authority over another. But there are strict orders for all Christians, including leaders, to act as servants within their communities¹³² (Matt 20:26; Mark 9:35; Gal 5:13).

Grounded in the Word of God. God's Word is the guide for authentic church ministry, and in it we find all of God's principles related to church ministry.

God's Word teaches that every believer is a minister. There are different ministries, but everyone is called by the Lord into ministry. Jesus came to this earth to serve (see Mark 10:45), and he called his followers to serve as he served us. Every Christian is created for ministry (Eph 2:10), saved for ministry (2 Tim 1:9), called into ministry (1 Pet 2:9-10), gifted for ministry (1 Pet 4:10), authorized for ministry (Matt 28:18-20), commanded to minister (Matt 20:26-28), to be prepared for ministry (Eph 4:11-12), needed for ministry (1 Cor 12:27) and accountable for ministry. Each believer will be rewarded according to his or her ministry (Col 3:23-24). In other words, the

¹³¹ Bilezikian, *Community 101*, 131. Leadership among Christians is not authority-intensive but service-based. Biblical leaders are willing to fall behind in order to help those who are struggling instead of striving to be first and to win the competition for power.

¹³² Ibid.

mark of authentic community is full participation of its members in the ministry of the community.¹³³

God's Word teaches that every ministry is important for the body. The apostle Paul says, "But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' and the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!' On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable" (1 Cor 12:18-22). Warren says, "There are no 'little people' in the Body of Christ, and there are no 'insignificant' ministries."¹³⁴

God's Word teaches that the members of the church are dependent on each other (Eph 4:11-16). Every ministry is important and intertwined with all others. No ministry is independent of the others. In a growing church, individualism and independence are replaced with biblical interdependence and mutuality.¹³⁵

God's Word teaches that ministry is the expression of each spiritual gift, heart, abilities, personality, and experiences (1 Cor 12). God gives to every Christian at least one gift. And God's gifts are given to be used for the benefit of the body.

Empowered by the Holy Spirit. Authentic ministry cannot be accomplished without God's Spirit. When the apostle Paul speaks about

¹³³ Ibid., 128.

¹³⁴ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 368.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

spiritual gifts, he explains that no one can confess Jesus as Lord except by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:3). Then he teaches that “there are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men” (1 Cor 12:4-5). And “all these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines” (1 Cor 12:11).

Authentic ministry is empowered by the Holy Spirit because he guides us in all truth and teaches us what to do (John 16:13). “While they [the first believers] were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them’” (Acts 13:2).

Today we may hear about “the vision of my church,” “my personal vision for the church,” or “my plan and my strategy.” When God called this author through the church to serve as senior pastor, one of the leaders asked him share his vision and strategy for this church. However, according to New Testament, the right question is, What is your vision? rather than, What is God’s vision for our lives and his church? God’s vision is Christ-centered, not ego-centered; it is grounded in the Word of God, not on personal opinion or abilities; it is empowered by the Holy Spirit, not by human power. Jesus has a different vision of maturity: the ability and willingness to be led where one

would rather not go. And if there is any hope for the church in the future, it will be hope for a poor church in which its leaders are willing to be led.¹³⁶

Conclusion

To serve as a spiritual leader in a church is an overwhelming responsibility. Such a privilege demands no less than our best effort. Therefore, every Christian leader should approach this responsibility with prayer, humility, joy, enthusiasm, and energy. There is no greater honor in this life than to be called by God to be one of his servant leaders.¹³⁷ Growing churches are led by people who expect their congregation to grow. They are people of faith who believe the promise of God, even in discouraging times. They are not afraid to believe God.¹³⁸

Growing churches are served by leaders who love the local church. And as Eugene Peterson says, “pastoral work is local, and pastors need to understand that all pastoral work takes place geographically.”¹³⁹ One of the problems of postmodernism is that pastors of local churches are involved in too many other activities outside of the church. And this affects in a direct manner their ministry quality and effectiveness. This influences directly their dedication toward church’s needs and tasks.

Growing churches are led and served by leaders who watch over the spiritual health of the congregation with the same attention they give to

¹³⁶ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 83.

¹³⁷ White, *Healthy Kingdom Churches*, 88.

¹³⁸ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 398.

¹³⁹ Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, 128-29.

nurture of their own spiritual lives (Acts 20:28). Their oversight is of the same nature as the watch care of shepherds with their flocks. Bilezikian notes that, like Jesus, good church leaders do not take care of the flock because they are “greedy for money” but because they are “eager to serve” (1 Pet 5:2). Like the work of good servants, their ministry is self-sacrificial.¹⁴⁰

Growing churches are served by leaders who know that the church belongs exclusively to God. The apostle Paul told the leaders at Ephesus that the church of God was “bought with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). And according to New Testament teaching, Christ provides the church with such servant leaders by gifting “some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers” (Eph 4:11).

Growing churches are served by leaders who dwell in God’s presence. If there is any focus that Christian leaders will need, it is the discipline of dwelling in the presence of the One who keeps asking us, “Do you love me?” This is the discipline of contemplative prayer. Through contemplative prayer we can keep ourselves from being pulled from one urgent issue to another and from becoming strangers to our own heart and God’s heart. Contemplative prayer keeps us home.¹⁴¹ Leadership begins with who we are, not what we do.¹⁴² For a church to be blessed by the Lord with growth, leaders must sincerely make every effort to live and serve like Jesus Christ. Our activity for God can only properly flow from a life with God. We cannot

¹⁴⁰ Bilezikian, *Community* 101,142-43.

¹⁴¹ Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*, 43.

¹⁴² Russell, *When God Builds a Church*, 75.

give what we do not possess. Doing for God in a way that is proportionate to our being with God is the only pathway to a pure heart and seeing God.¹⁴³

Growing churches are served by leaders who know when to confront criticism and when to ignore it.¹⁴⁴ One of the easiest ways to divide the body of Christ is to constantly be critical of the church's leaders. Some people have tongues that are cutting, caustic, and sarcastic. They usually have no idea how much damage their criticism does. They are convinced they have the "spiritual gift" of criticism! But their attitude is divisive.¹⁴⁵ The Bible says (Jas 3:5-6) that constant, vicious criticism is lethal. It dampens enthusiasm, stifles creativity, discourages leaders, and quenches the spirit of the church. Conflict often develops because church leaders pay too much attention to criticism. A good leader cannot please everybody, and if he tries, then this is the first step to his failure.

Leadership is a privilege, not a right, and the essence of Christian leadership is the courage to give, not the desire to rule. Bilezikian says that in a community composed of mutual servants, no one has the right to play rulership.¹⁴⁶

As the People of God, the Church Is Called to Evangelism

Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

—1 Peter 2:10

¹⁴³ Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, 32.

¹⁴⁴ Russell, *When God Builds a Church*, 156.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 156-57.

¹⁴⁶ Bilezikian, *Community 101*, 168.

One of the most visible signs that a church is healthy and growth-oriented is its attitude and passion for sharing the good news of Christ. By its nature, the church is called by the Lord of the harvest to share the good news of Christ.

According to a survey among Baptist pastors in Moldova, 88% of them indicated that evangelism is a key to church growth. That is one reason why, in the last fifteen years, the Baptist churches in Moldova have experienced such tremendous numerical growth. Also, 90% of the pastors agreed that indifference among leaders and members for lost people, an idle attitude toward evangelism, self-contentment, and weak passion are obstacles to church growth. For churches that grow and advance, evangelism is not an option but a daily act of passion for the lost. Growing churches love people and love to see people coming into the kingdom of God.

A growing church knows that it is a unique, divinely empowered institution with a call and responsibility to preach the gospel and point people to Jesus Christ. A growing church understands its call and mandate to preach continuously the good news of Christ. And growing churches know that as a result of preaching and sharing the Good News, the Lord will make the church grow as the early church grew (Acts 2:47). Growing churches sow of the gospel and do the watering, and God saves and adds.

The Importance of Evangelism for Church Growth

C. Peter Wagner, in *Your Church Can Grow*, said, “If effective evangelism happens it has to begin and end with the local church.”¹⁴⁷ In other words, the church by its divine identity and call must take responsibility for sharing Christ’s good news in the world.

Evangelism is important for the church because God loves this world. The Bible says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Evangelism is important because of the church’s divine nature. The members of the church are called by Jesus to be his witnesses: “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden” (Matt 5:14). Jesus compares his disciples with light, which brightens, guides people through darkness, and warns of danger. Borthwick says about Matthew 5:13-16, “Something we often overlook about both salt and light: Jesus does not say, ‘You are the *salt of the church*’ or ‘You are the *light of the church*.’ We’re called to be *salt of the earth* and *light of the world*.¹⁴⁸”

By its nature, the church cannot be hidden from the world. In John 17:15, 18, Jesus prays, “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. . . . As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.” God’s people can boldly preach the Good News to this world because God will protect us (1 John 4:4; Matt 16:8).

¹⁴⁷ C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1971), 143.

¹⁴⁸ Borthwick, *Stop Witnessing and Start Loving*, 60.

However, as Borthwick says, “too many times we focus on our own spiritual health, our own fellowship, and our own doctrinal purity—often at the expense of interaction with the world. We often get so caught up in activities related to the church that we unintentionally marginalize ourselves from the world.”¹⁴⁹

Evangelism is more than our responsibility; it is our great privilege. We are invited to be part of bringing people into God’s eternal family.¹⁵⁰ Church growth is commanded by Jesus. In evangelism, we should not be preoccupied by numerical church growth. Instead, we must share the Good News with others because Jesus wants people to be saved.

The Meaning of Biblical Evangelism

Evangelism is the natural result of a Christ-filled body, alive and functioning within a community. Evangelism is not an event, a meeting, or an activity. It may include these, but evangelism is the outflow of the overflow of Christ’s life in a church body.¹⁵¹ Therefore evangelism is a life process (see Acts 2:47). The early church grew as believers experienced favor in the eyes of the watching world (Acts 5:13-14). For a growing church, evangelism is a lifestyle. However, the New Testament also-describes how Paul and others planned missions (Acts 13:14; 14:1; 17:19-31).

Growing churches evangelize through a good reputation in the community (see Acts 2:47). According the survey among pastors in Moldova,

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 54.

¹⁵⁰ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 104-5.

¹⁵¹ Robinson, *Total Church Life*, 145.

80% of them declared that a bad reputation on the part of church leaders and members is an obstacle to church growth.

Growing churches must be not conformed to this world (Rom 12:1-2). The church is not called to be what society wants to be but to be what society needs. And when a church compromises its nature and call, it hinders its growth. White says that the greatest strength of the church's reputation will be built upon faithfulness to who we are. This includes faithfulness to the truth of the Bible and the lordship of Jesus Christ and an unswerving commitment to be the church, standing for what is right. When the church tries to be something other than the church, it loses credibility with the community.¹⁵²

The Nature of Biblical Evangelism in a Growing Church

Centered in Christ. If Christ is exalted, if the people of God are equipped for the ministry, then the church will reach the lost. The mission of Jesus in our world is to seek and save the lost. If a church is his body, Christ lives within. His mission becomes our mission. As beats the heart of Jesus, so beats the heart of his body, the church.¹⁵³

Authentic evangelism is Christ-centered because salvation is only through the blood of Jesus Christ, as John 3:17 teaches: "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." The apostle Paul writes that Jesus took on the "nature of a servant" and "became obedient to death—even death on a cross. Therefore

¹⁵² White, *Healthy Kingdom Churches*, 148-49.

¹⁵³ Robinson, *Total Church Life*, 23.

God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:7-11).

Authentic evangelism is Christ-centered because Jesus is the greatest example of how to evangelize. As Jesus went through towns and villages, he taught, preached the Good News, and healed people (Luke 8:1; Matt 9:35). Jesus not only went through all towns and villages; he had a deep compassion for people. Matthew 9:36 expands on this facet of Jesus' ministry: "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." Passion is something that a person is so intensely committed to that he or she would be willing to suffer or die for it. "Passionate people are paying the price, absorb the cost, and go after their purposes with sold-out zeal."¹⁵⁴ The apostle Paul articulates his passion in a great way (Phil 3:7-14). He lived with a heart for the lost people of his world. Witness, evangelism, service, and all other forms of outreach flow from passion to know Christ. Out of that passion flows our love for lost people. When we are filled with the love of Christ and understand his love for us, then we overflow and touch the lives of the people around us.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ Borthwick, *Stop Witnessing and Start Loving*, 18-19. The word for "passion" is *pascho*, which literally is linked to the verb meaning "to suffer," translated as "Christ's" suffering (Acts 1:3).

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 24. Borthwick identifies three things that smother our passion. First, bitterness destroys our passion to know Jesus; second, our desire for security waters down our passion; and third, materialism quenches our passion.

A growing church knows to find the needs of people and fulfill them. It is true that people are hungry for many things: food, employment, more adequate housing, recreation, financial security, good health, a stable marriage. And churches can and do help to meet all these needs to one extent or another. But the one acute human need that churches and only churches can meet is the desire to relate to the ultimate, to know God personally. In plain biblical language, churches are places where people can be saved. No other social institution can match that claim.¹⁵⁶

If we as believers, satisfied that we are already saved and our eternity is assured, stay only in the church, then we will never be able to fulfill our call to be salt and light in the world. Church growth involves more than the church's care for those who are already saved. True church growth requires a deep passion to share God's love with the people who are not yet saved. As Borthwick says:

If all of our time is spent with our Christian peers, something is drastically wrong. We go to church each week to renew our saltiness and clean up our light—so that Jesus can send us back into the world, refreshed and strengthened. As his salt and light in the world, Jesus calls us to go back out—to be the flavor enhancers and darkness dispellers in the world. Being light means that we let people see our faith. We don't hide it or exercise our faith only in the family of God.¹⁵⁷

Authentic evangelism is Christ-centered because Jesus is Lord of the harvest. Observing people's needs, Jesus said to his disciples, "The harvest

¹⁵⁶ Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, 148.

¹⁵⁷ Borthwick, *Stop Witnessing and Start Loving*, 60-61.

is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Matt 9:37).

Authentic evangelism is Christ-centered because Jesus mandated his followers to share the Good News. He told them that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him (Matt 28:18-20). In the Gospel of Mark it is written, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation” (Mark 16:15). To be in the world but not of it requires the church to understand the surrounding culture and to resist its idolatries.¹⁵⁸

The apostle Paul exclaims that “we are therefore Christ’s ambassadors” in this world (2 Cor 5:20). As ambassadors of Christ,¹⁵⁹ first we are called to serve our King in a foreign country (1 Pet 2:11); second, we are sent to convey our King’s message; and finally, we are called to work hard at understanding the culture and the needs of people.¹⁶⁰ The call of Christ today is the same as it was when he left us here to serve him “even to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20). We have not yet come to the end of the age. That call is to be his apprentices, alive in the power of God, learning to do, leading others into apprenticeship to him, and teaching them how to do everything he said.¹⁶¹

A growing church understands that there is no option but to evangelize. By its nature, the church was called and gifted by its Lord with the capacity to

¹⁵⁸ Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, 41.

¹⁵⁹ Being an ambassador in the political arena usually means serving in a foreign land; having an ability to communicate the message of our king or ruler to those in another kingdom; having an ability to understand the culture of our recipients enough to make sure that we communicate our message accurately and clearly, in terms they understand. See Borthwick, *Stop Witnessing and Start Loving*, 86.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 86-87.

¹⁶¹ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 321.

preach, to teach, and to baptize. In other words, the church was blessed by the Lord with the capacity to multiply.

Grounded in the Word of God. Authentic evangelism must be grounded in the Word of God because its message contains the living Word of God. In his earthly ministry, Jesus always spoke the Word of God to people (Mark 4:33; John 17:14). The apostle Paul declares, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes; first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith’” (Rom 1:16-17). Churches that grow and advance are not preoccupied with making people feel good and have fun during worship services. Growing churches help people to know the God’s Word and his truth, to do good, to please the Lord and have a good reputation with people. Christ called his church to give to the community that which no one else can give. Growing churches must provide the good news of Jesus Christ to a world that hungers and thirsts for the food that gives eternal life.¹⁶² A growing church knows the gospel and shares it. We need a biblical understanding of evangelism. First, the decision to evangelize is costly and therefore must be carefully considered (see Luke 9:62). Second, the decision to evangelize is urgent and therefore must be made (see John 3:18, 36). Third, the decision to evangelize is worth it and therefore should be made (see John 10:10).

¹⁶² White, *Healthy Kingdom Churches*, 154.

Authentic evangelism must be grounded in the Word of God because this was the practice of the apostolic church. The book of Acts mentions that the Word of God spread, the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became believers (Acts 6:7; 8:4; 12:24). The apostles preached the Word of God wherever they went (Acts 8:4; 14).

Authentic evangelism must be grounded in the Word of God because the evangelistic message comes through the hearing of the holy Word. The apostle Paul explains that faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ (Rom 10:17).

Authentic evangelism must be grounded in the Word of God because only the Word of God can change people's hearts. The Bible says, "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Heb 4:12). It is the word of God that is at work in those who believe (1 Thess 2:13).

Authentic evangelism must be grounded in the Word of God because everything in this world changes, "but the Word of the Lord stands forever." And this is the word that was preached to us (1 Pet 1:25). Therefore, in a growing church, the Word of God is not taken lightly. The apostle Paul challenges the church of Christ not to peddle the word of God for profit (2 Cor 2:17). Thus a healthy, growing church will pray that God's Word may spread rapidly and be honored (2 Thess 3:1).

At the foundation of our desire to mobilize the local church for local and global outreach stands the character of God. As followers of Christ, we supremely desire that our lives and our churches reflect God's character to the world. We want a heart for the lost because God has a heart for the lost!¹⁶³

Empowered by the Holy Spirit. Growing churches recognize the importance of the work of God's Spirit throughout the witnessing process. In the book of Acts, Christ sets forth the vision and mission strategy for his followers: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Every church that grows remembers that it was called by the Lord to carry the gospel to our Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. That work must be done in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Authentic evangelism must be empowered by the Holy Spirit because people are born again through the work of the Spirit (John 3:6; 6:33). Luke writes about how the early Christians, after they were filled with the Holy Spirit, spoke the word of God boldly (Acts 4:31). The apostle Paul writes to the church in Thessalonica that "our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction" (1 Thess 1:5).

¹⁶³ Borthwick, *Stop Witnessing and Start Loving*, 123. God's love for the lost can be observed in at least three ways: first, God is seeking lost people (Luke 19:10); second, God has a sacrificial heart (Isa 53:6; John 3:16; 1 John 4:10); third, God seeks living people who will respond to his call (Isa 6:8; Matt 28:18-20, Acts 1:8; John 20:21).

Authentic evangelism must be empowered by the Holy Spirit because it is not possible to be God's witness without his Holy Spirit. "If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ" (Rom 8:9).

As followers of Jesus Christ, we make up the people of God, the Christian community, and the church. But Jesus calls us to be in the world. He says, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21). And he prays for his disciples and us, not that God will take us out of the world but that God will protect us from the evil one (see John 17:15). Therefore, we live in two worlds, the community of faith and the community of the world, where we live as illustrations of the love of God through Jesus Christ. As citizens of two communities, Christians can drift in two divergent directions. We can become extremists either in our desire to influence the world or in our dedication to the Christian community. We can escape from the world and secular society, or we can abandon the church and go into the world.¹⁶⁴ When we understand God's sending heart, we start accepting our God-given privilege of partnering with him in outreach.

In the early church, there were evangelists. But their function is described as preparing "God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up" (Eph 4:11-12). Indeed, the people best qualified to carry out the evangelistic mandate of the church are not professional evangelists or those occupying pulpits. By a strange reversion, the greater the focus on pulpit evangelism, altar calls, evangelistic crusades, revivals, and special meetings, the less incentive there is for laypeople to become

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 107.

personally involved in witnessing for their faith. They are made to feel that a better qualified professional can do it in their place. But let evangelists and pastors train every believer to be a witness, and outreach will multiply exponentially.¹⁶⁵ We cannot bring the good news on our own. We are called to proclaim the gospel together, in community.¹⁶⁶ There is a divine wisdom here (Matt 18:19-20). Outreach is one essential task of Christ's people, and among them there will always be those especially gifted for evangelism. But the most successful work of outreach is the work of inreach that turns people, wherever they are, into lights in a darkened world.¹⁶⁷ The methods, models, and evangelistic programs are not the most critical problem of these times. The issue is not a failure of programming but rather a failure of passion. Therefore it is essential to restore the passion that produced great evangelistic fervor.¹⁶⁸

To fulfill the Great Commission, a plan for evangelism must, of necessity, incorporate a strategy for going into the marketplace and engaging lost people on their turf. Second, it must ensure that those won are baptized into the life of the local church. And finally, the church must have in place a strategy designed to teach members to observe all that Jesus commanded. Evangelism and discipleship must be equally balanced if the church is to

¹⁶⁵ Bilezikian, *Community 101*, 146-47.

¹⁶⁶ Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*, 58.

¹⁶⁷ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 244.

¹⁶⁸ Hemphill, *The Antioch Effect*, 148.

experience stable growth that leads to maturity and reaches its community and world.¹⁶⁹

Scazzero says that one of the greatest gifts we can give our world is to be a community of emotionally healthy adults who love well. This will take the power of God and a commitment to learn, grow, and break with unhealthy, destructive patterns that go back generations in our families and cultures, and in some cases, our Christian culture also.¹⁷⁰ Therefore, one of the main signs that church grows and advances is its attitude toward the mission field. Every church, small or large, is called to share the Good News. And as Warren says, we can measure the health and strength of a church by its sending capacity rather than its seating capacity. A healthy church is a missionary sending church.¹⁷¹

Also, growing churches know that common worship services should become a great occasion and opportunity for people to hear a Christ-centered, biblically grounded, and Spirit-empowered Good News. Here people should have the chance to find God's presence. And in such an atmosphere, the Holy Spirit has the power to convict sinners of their desperate need to accept Jesus, to make them fall down and worship God, and to acknowledge that God is among them (1 Cor 14:25).

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 149.

¹⁷⁰ Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, 193.

¹⁷¹ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 32.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is evident that a primary task of a local church, as Warren says, is to understand the purposes Christ has for the church and to implement them. While programs will change in every generation, purposes never change. We may be creative with the style of ministry, but we must never alter the substance of it. As the owner of the church, Jesus has already established the purposes, and they are not negotiable.¹⁷²

Growing churches understand that as the temple of God, the local church is called to grow stronger through authentic worship. As the household of God, the local church is called to grow warmer through authentic fellowship. As the bride of Christ, the local church is called to grow deeper through authentic discipleship. As the body of Christ, the local church is called to grow broader through ministry. And as the people of God, the local church is called to grow larger through authentic evangelism.

We now have an understanding of church's identity and call. In the next chapter, we will identify the main obstacles hinder a church from growing and fulfilling its call.

¹⁷² Ibid., 98.

Chapter 4

OBSTACLES TO HEALTHY CHURCH GROWTH

In chapter 3, the emphasis was on understanding that healthy, growing churches know where they want to go. In other words, they understand their call. But, going deeper into our research, one question that arises is, Why do some churches grow and other churches don't?

This chapter will offer an answer to this question by identifying the main obstacles that hinder healthy church growth. Predominantly these are the obstacles that have been discovered in a survey among pastors and evangelical churches in Moldova. And one implication of these findings is that all of us can learn from those obstacles.

AN ANALYSIS OF THE SURVEY

In a recent survey,¹ more than 80 pastors from Moldova were asked to indicate the most significant factors that hinder healthy church growth. There were different answers and opinions, but a majority pointed out similar obstacles to church growth. Eight significant obstacles were identified in the survey.

Christians' Indifference to Church Ministry and the Unsaved

About 90% of those who had been interviewed agreed that Christians' passivity, coldness, and lack of dedication hinder church growth. Most of the

¹ See the appendix.

pastors agreed that this indifference is fed by a mentality of self-satisfaction. Too many Christians are satisfied with their level of spirituality and not satisfied with their material condition. A first conclusion is that among Christians there persists a high unconcern for lost people and toward the work of God. In our day, fewer people are willing to be involved in evangelism and sharing the Good News, and fewer church members are willing to be involved in church ministry. Among Christians, there is a tendency to become spiritual consumers instead of being altruistic body members.

A Wrong Christian Testimony

About 80% of the pastors agreed that wrong testimony on the part of Christians and the church is one of the greatest obstacles to healthy church growth. Many pastors mentioned that compromise with sin, hidden sins of believers, and unchristian behaviors and lifestyle hinder healthy church growth. Christians all around the world face a great challenge to cherish their Christian identity and be a powerful testimony and an instrument of God's love and holiness among people.

Divisions among Church Members

Approximately 46% of the pastors said that lack of love among Christians, lack of fellowship among church members, and lack of unity and fellowship among church leaders are obstacles to healthy church growth. Such things lead only to interpersonal conflicts and disputes and finally hinder growth.

During communist rule, the evangelical church was acknowledged as a strong, united community, even by its detractors. Currently, there is a tendency to lose this mark of unity. A divided church cannot experience a healthy growth. Such a spiritual atmosphere hinders the church from growth.

Preoccupation with Materialism

About 80% of the pastors agreed that materialism also hinders church growth. The economic crisis in Moldova² affects Christians and church ministry directly. Because of this crisis, many Christians leave their family, country, and the local church. Their emigration affects them as individuals, as well as their family and the church. Also, many pastors agreed that even though there is an economic crisis, at the same time there are more opportunities. Thus, many Christians are preoccupied with earthly and material things. In addition, according to the survey, some leaders look at their position an easy way of obtaining material possessions and opportunities for them and their families.

² Moldova's economy, never heavily industrialized, is based on agriculture and food processing. It was seriously affected by the Soviet breakup, the civil war, and Russia's 1998 economic crisis, and it began to recover only in 2000. Moldova remains Europe's poorest country but continues to make some economic progress. About two-thirds of all Moldovans live below the poverty line. Nearly 600,000 Moldovan citizens—one-third of the workforce—live and work abroad, transferring funds to their families in Moldova. But because of that, more than 20,000 children grow up without their parents. The divorce rate is growing. As Moldova's largest trading partner, Russia wields considerable influence over the Moldovan economy. Moldova's near-total dependence on outside sources for industrial inputs and energy has been its major economic challenge.

Inappropriate Preaching and Lack of Bible Study

The interviewed pastors (about 80% of them) agreed that good biblical preaching, preaching in the power of Holy Spirit, and healthy Bible study are crucial factors in promoting healthy church growth. And 46% of the pastors later mentioned that weak preaching and lack of Bible study are among the major obstacles to healthy church growth. This obstacle includes at least two aspects. The first aspect is that weak preaching and preparation for preaching the Word influence in a direct manner the church's growth. The second aspect is the lack of Bible study among church members, which leads to a weak understanding of God's Word. As a result, Christians are spiritually hungry and weak during their spiritual journey.

A Weak Minister and Weak Ministry

Approximately 53% of the pastors considered that strong leadership is an important factor that determines church growth. By "strong leadership" they mean a dedicated pastor, one who has a heart for ministry, has a clear vision, knows what to do, is spiritually mature, inspires others to ministry, delegates responsibilities, is an example for others in the ministry, and is led by the Holy Spirit. Then, 34% agreed that weak leaders hinder healthy church growth. By weak leaders was meant the lack of a pastor's dedication or that the pastor tends to be more a leader than a servant, has a weak spiritual condition and a weak testimony, lacks vision, works by himself, and does not cooperate. Also, the church leader's attitude toward the ministry affects the church members'

attitude toward deferent ministries. In such a context, fewer people are involved, and fewer church members are encouraged to serve. This situation helps Christians to become spectators in the body of Christ.

Lack of Prayer and Fasting

About 53% of the pastors considered prayer³ as a main factor that determines and contributes to healthy church growth. But only 9% considered the lack of prayer to be a significant obstacle for healthy church growth. This contention could stem from several reasons, one of which might be the insufficiency of the pastor's personal prayer life. The temptation to limit or neglect prayer is always a danger.

Lack of God's Vision

According to the survey, more than 30% of pastors consider that lack of vision is a significant factor that hinders church growth. Most pastors agreed that lack of vision is caused predominantly by a pastor with no vision. And where there is no vision, church goals are not clear; church members do not know what they can do and what they should do. Writing about the same issue, C. Peter Wagner said, "The most formidable obstacle to growth that I know of is a pastor who thinks negatively and who is pessimistic about growth opportunities in the community. Such a pastor generally feels that the basic task of the church is to care those sheep already in the fold rather than to

³ The pastors referred to common prayer, small prayer groups, personal prayer, and prayer for unsaved people.

concentrate on winning lost sheep and constantly incorporating new ones into the flock.”⁴

In the survey, some other obstacles were mentioned, but at a lower rate. For instance, 15% of pastors considered that legalism and traditionalism also hinder healthy church growth. This approach usually affects the young generation, and such churches try to live in the past. About 8% considered that other religions hinder church growth. But according the survey, only 1.5% considered that the lack of a building or space hinders healthy church growth.

Conclusions

This survey among Moldova’s pastors and churches reveals and helps us identify some specific, universal factors hindering healthy church growth. And it is vital to observe that these obstacles are not external; rather, they are internal. In other words, we must not blame the world for not being able to advance. The obstacles are inside of the church.

Also, a general overview of these internal factors reveals that these obstacles are linked directly or indirectly with two major issues: the church’s identity and purpose. And these factors are associated with the church’s worship, discipleship, fellowship, service, and evangelism. Keeping in mind the outcomes of the survey, we will identify and explore the most significant obstacles that might hinder a church from growing and advancing.

⁴ C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1971), 52, 77.

THE MAIN OBSTACLES TO HEALTHY CHURCH GROWTH

Jesus Christ said that he came that we might have life and have it in abundance (John 10:10). It is God's will and desire for believers to grow individually and corporately as the body of Christ. The apostle Peter tells us to desire the pure milk of the Word that we may grow (1 Pet 2:3). The apostle Paul, speaking of the church as the body of Christ, states that when every part does its share, the body grows and is edified in love (Eph 4:16). And Jesus promised to build and make his church advance. God wants his church to grow and not to stagnate. But as we seek to grow for Christ, we must be aware of the fact that while God does want us and his church to grow, Satan prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. He will devise many obstacles to keep a person and a church from healthy growth (1 Pet 5:8).

When a body stops growing and starts declining, we look to find out what is wrong. And since the church is a living organism, not an organization, it is natural for it to grow and advance if the obstacles to growth are taken away. According to the research in this thesis, healthy church growth is hindered by inappropriate worship, discipleship, fellowship, ministry, and evangelism.

Inappropriate Approach to Worship

One of the greatest obstacles to growth is weak, inadequate worship. In *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, Marva J. Dawn observed, "I am

worried about Church. The ‘worship wars’ that rage in so many congregations are preventing us from truly being the Church.”⁵ From the beginning, God desired and expected from his people authentic and untainted worship. When the first men brought their offerings to God, the Bible says that “the LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor” (Gen 4:4-5). The same idea is repeated by the prophet Amos, through whom God said to his chosen people, “I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them” (Amos 5:21-22).

Also, the New Testament abounds with the same perspective toward worship. Many passages indicate that God cannot accept every kind of worship. Contrariwise, the author of Hebrews urges, “since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our ‘God is a consuming fire’” (Heb 12:28-29). God rejects worship that is not appropriate to his divine standards, which never change.

Marks of Inappropriate Approach to Worship

An important question that arises is, What are the marks of worship that is not pleasing to God? In other words, what are those worship aspects

⁵ Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 3. Dawn’s major concern for the church has to do with worship. Its character-forming potential is subtle and barely noticed, and yet worship creates a great impact on the hearts, minds, and lives of a congregation’s members.

that may hinder healthy church growth? The Bible exposes significant marks of inadequate worship.

Human-centered worship. There is a profound temptation for worship services to be reduced to a human-centered activity. In this view, everything in worship is about us and not about God. James Torrance affirms that the anthropocentric approach to worship is perhaps the most frequently practiced. He says that many times worship can be observed as something we do on Sunday at church. We go to church, we sing psalms and hymns to God, and we offer our talents to God. Of course, we need God's grace to help us, and we do worship because Jesus told us to do so. But worship is what we do. Such a worship perspective, says Torrance, is not evangelical and not trinitarian.⁶

According to Torrance, unitarian worship is marked by what we do. This approach "has no doctrine of the mediator or sole priesthood of Christ, is human centered, has no proper doctrine of the Holly Spirit, is too often non-sacramental, and can engender weariness. We sit in the pew watching the minister 'doing his thing,' exhorting us 'to do our thing,' until we go home thinking we have done our duty for another week!"⁷

Today, many churches are increasingly concerned with worship that centers around people and their needs rather than on Christ and his work. This kind of worship subtly excludes Christ-centered worship. According to

⁶ James B. Torrance, *The Forgotten Trinity*, ed. Alasdair I. C. Heron (London: Inter-Church House, 1991), 5-6.

⁷ James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 20.

this philosophy, it might be said that worship is an act from us, through us, and for us. But such a worship perspective hinders authentic, healthy church growth. Such worship limits and hinders unsaved people from being confronted with God's presence in his people's worship.

Worship that is not grounded in the Word of God. The second mark of inadequate worship is worship that is not grounded in the holy Word of God. The apostle Paul told Timothy, “For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths”⁸ (2 Tim 4:3-4). In our generation there persists a tendency to ignore the centrality of God. It is not unusual to hear sermons interwoven with jokes or attempts to create an entertaining atmosphere.

Church history shows that there have been times when people neglected or minimized the importance and the power of God's Word. And if the Word of God is neglected or reduced to a human's articulated and well-prepared speech, there is no an authentic worship. The churches that reduce the centrality of God's Word in worship services will not experience healthy growth. Therefore, Luther's principle of *sola Scriptura* must be reactualized. A church that worships truly will be one that loves and delights in the Word of God. There is no substitute for Scripture, because “all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in

⁸ The Greek word for “myth” is *muthos*, which means a fable, a fiction, an invention, or even a falsehood.

righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17).

Worship that is devoid of the Holy Spirit’s power. A significant aspect of inadequate church worship is lack of the power of God. Paul told Timothy, “There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power” (2 Tim 3:1-5). Where there is no Spirit, there is no worship, because Jesus requires his worshipers to worship the Father in spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24).

During church history, there have persisted two extremes regarding the Holy Spirit’s work in worship. The first extreme is to abdicate dependence on the Holy Spirit. These churches have a strong tendency toward a rigid program and legalism. Their worship services are so strictly programmed that there is no place for the work of the Holy Spirit. There is no room for God’s presence or spontaneous prayers; because it was not included in the program, it may affect our program. Worse, there is no room for repentance. In consequence, these churches have programs but not divine power and presence among them.

The second extreme is to avoid any planning and preparing of structure or order. These churches argue that worship services are led

entirely by the Holy Spirit. The apostle Paul speaks about both attitudes toward worship (1 Cor 14:33). Without the work of the Holy Spirit, Christian worship would be just a simple human act, similar to a pagan one. Without the Holy Spirit, the message of Christ would remain just an idea, but by the empowering of the Holy Spirit it becomes a divine reality. And as a result, without the Holy Spirit's work in worship, there is no spiritual birth, and implicitly there is no growth.

A superficial approach to worship services. Another significant aspect of inadequate church worship is to minimize the priority of worship or to have a wrong or a superficial approach toward worship. An inadequate attitude toward worship limits the first call of the church to be a worshiping community. Worship becomes a social meeting, with many activities and places for entertainment. A. W. Tozer said that churches are cluttered with religious amateurs culturally unfit to minister at the altar, and the people suffer as a consequence.⁹

Neglecting the necessity of common worship. When gathering together is viewed as an option, the church will not grow in a healthy manner. Today, many Christians are tempted to minimize the importance of belonging to a local church, and this has to do with a misunderstanding of the nature of common worship. Many Christians see common worship as an option and not as a privilege. But according to the New Testament, God requires his people to meet together because, as Miroslav Volf writes, “the church is first of all an

⁹ Warren W. Wiersbe, comp., *The Best of A. W. Tozer* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1978), 76.

assembly."¹⁰ In other words, the church is a visible assembly of persons at a specific place, for a specific purpose.

Passivity during worship services. Passivity is another significant aspect of inappropriate worship. Robert E. Webber says that passive worship assumes that worship is something that somebody else does to you and for you.¹¹ In many worship services, people are spectators and consumers, absorbing the program without being involved in anything. In such a context, a few people are worship performers. Too many church members are pew-sitting consumers. As a result, there is insufficient ministry leadership, and the Reformation theme of the priesthood of all believers remains for many churches an ideal rather than a reality. Also, passivity often is excused by traditional approaches to worship services. And many organizations become victims of tradition and past successes.¹² Therefore, when there are no opportunities for every member to be involved, to participate, and to contribute, that will hinder healthy church growth.

Neglecting common prayer. A clear sign that a church will not experience healthy growth is when church leaders and members are not deeply committed to the power of prayer. Every church that stops growing has faulted the priority of prayer. While most pastors and leaders recognize the importance and the value of prayer, it is still often neglected. And when

¹⁰ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 136-37. Volf argues that even if the church is not assembled, it lives on as a church in the mutual service its members render to one another and in its common mission to the world.

¹¹ Robert E. Webber, *Worship Is a Verb* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 17.

¹² Pat MacMillan, *The Performance Factor* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 5. MacMillan argues that many organizations fail to meet external challenges because they fail to recognize or respond to change.

prayer is neglected in the pastor's or leader's personal life, then this situation will directly affect the church's attitude toward prayer. When a pastor reduces his personal time for prayer, the church he pastors usually will reduce the time for prayer during worship services as well as in the lives of members. And usually the church's prayer life will not grow beyond that pastor's level.

Another way in which the priority of the common prayer is undermined is in the pastoral prayers. As Webber notes, "In many churches, the pastoral prayer substitutes for personal prayer, it puts all prayer and requests into the mouth of the pastor."¹³ Consequently, during church worship, the common prayer time is reduced or replaced, and worshipers who came to worship are deprived of the privilege of common prayer.

It is possible to list other marks of inappropriate worship, but the marks examined here are significant evidences that inappropriate worship will hinder healthy church growth.

Inappropriate Approach to Discipleship

Another great obstacle that hinders healthy church growth is inappropriate discipleship. One of the main preoccupations of Jesus during his earthly ministry was to make disciples. And in his last words to his disciples, Jesus urged them to go and do the same thing as their Master did (Matt 28:19-20). This Great Commission is still valid for every Christian and for every local church.

¹³ Webber, *Worship Is a Verb*, 9. In churches where prayer has been returned to the people, each individual is able to pray, to make his or her supplications and thanksgiving known to God.

In the last decades, churches around the world have focused on church planting and evangelism. As a result of those activities, more members were added to local churches, and new churches were planted. For instance, in the Republic of Moldova, more than 400 churches were planted since 1990. But preoccupation with evangelism and bringing new people into the church means that on many occasions discipleship was neglected or not developed as it should be. A church can be distracted from its divine purposes even through good activities, but for a local church to grow and advance, discipleship is not an option. It is a must, a divine call and life process for every follower of Jesus.

Marks of Inappropriate Approach to Discipleship

On several occasions, Jesus made it clear that not everyone who follows him is a true disciple (Matt 7:21; John 13:35; 15:8). These verses and many others lead to the conclusion that specific factors can affect a church's discipleship.

Human-centered discipleship. Speaking about discipleship in the context of spiritual formation, Dallas Willard notes that a fundamental mistake is that a church "takes as its basic goal to get as many people as possible ready to die and go to heaven."¹⁴ In other words, churches are preoccupied with bringing people in but neglect spiritual formation into Christ-likeness. Growing churches understand that in the process of discipleship, Jesus must be at the center. He is the great Master and Teacher. He spent most of his life

¹⁴ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 239.

teaching his followers to become authentic disciples, and finally he commanded them to go into the world and make disciples of all nations. He also promised that he will be with them to the end of the age.

For this reason, authentic discipleship is Christ-centered and not anthropocentric. Discipleship without Christ remains an abstract idea, a myth that has a place for plans and strategies but omits Christ as the living Son of God. This is a kind of discipleship does not lead to following Christ. Inadequate discipleship gathers people around a human leader. And if people are not challenged to have an authentic personal relationship with the great Master, that process of discipleship may lead to a cult of a person rather than to discipleship with Jesus. As a result, the new believer's ultimate goal is not to become like Jesus but to become like his professor. Learning good things from a professor or a leader has positive aspects, but if the ultimate goal of discipleship is not the desire to become more like Jesus, that will hinder healthy church growth. Discipleship that is not Christ-centered cannot be fruitful, because according to Christ, apart from him we can do nothing (John 15:5). Therefore, an authentic disciple's journey is from him, through him, and for him (Rom 11:36).

Not grounded in the Word of God. One of the most important factors that make the church grow spiritually and numerically is following the Word of God. At the end of his mission on earth, Jesus said to his disciples, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching

them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt 28:19-20). On another occasion, Jesus said to those who had believed him, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples" (John 8:31). The supreme condition for being a disciple of Christ is to remain grounded in his Word.

According to a survey among 80 pastors and leaders in Moldova, 79% of them indicated that church growth occurs where there exists healthy biblical teaching, strong preaching of the Word of God, and authentic Bible study. This indicator leads to the conclusion that inadequate preaching and Bible study will hinder a church from healthy growth, because there is no substitute for preaching and teaching of the gospel of Christ.

Haddon Robinson emphasizes that those in the pulpit face the pressing temptation to deliver a message other than that of Scripture—a political system, a theory of economics, a new religious philosophy, old religious slogans, or a trend in psychology. And when preachers fail to preach the Scriptures, they abandon their authority. No longer do they confront their hearers with a word from God. That is why most modern preaching evokes little more than a wide yawn. God speaks through the Bible. It is the major tool of communication by which he addresses individuals today.¹⁵

Therefore, it is a mistake to use the church's pulpit and the people's time to deliver human speeches that inform and but do not transform. Healthy church growth stumbles when discipleship has been replaced by or reduced to receiving simple information. Too many sermons and Bible studies simply

¹⁵ Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 20. Biblical preaching must be equated with "the old, old story of Jesus and his love."

bring information about God to the auditorium. But in churches that grow, the teaching of God's Word is central, and it changes lives into Christ-likeness.

Undermining the work and power of the Holy Spirit. For healthy discipleship, the empowering work of the Holy Spirit is indispensable. One of the Holy Spirit's tasks is to guide Christ's followers into all God's truth (John 16:13). Discipleship without the Holy Spirit is discipleship with no authentic fruits (Gal 5:16-22). The New Testament says that if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he or she does not belong to Christ (Rom 8:9). Also, since the Holy Spirit empowers preaching and study of God's Word, it is impossible for a church to grow in a healthy manner and at the same time neglect the work of the Holy Spirit (1 Thess 1:4-5). According to Jesus' Great Commission, one of the main tasks of authentic discipleship is to baptize believers in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matt 28:19-20). All these passages and many others highlight the divine and indispensable work of the Holy Spirit throughout the process of discipleship.

An inadequate approach to discipleship is to identify and reduce it to simply bringing people into a building. If a church stops making disciples according to the Lord's teaching, that church neglects the Great Commission of Jesus Christ and cannot experience healthy growth.

Inappropriate Approach to Fellowship

One of the greatest signs of authentic church growth is unity, and one of the greatest obstacles to healthy church growth is the lack of it. And where

there is no unity, there is no fellowship. True fellowship is more than human community; it must be spiritual community. As Larry Crabb says, it is a tragedy to live in unspiritual community. It is an even greater tragedy to live in unspiritual community and be satisfied and think that is spiritual.¹⁶

According to a survey among pastors in Moldova, 69% of them considered that good fellowship in the church is a key factor for church growth. Most pastors agreed that the lack of love and unity among pastors, leaders, church committees, and church members, along with unresolved conflicts, are major obstacles to church growth. As Darrell Robinson says, a church will never grow beyond its fellowship. If the fellowship is right, the church will continue to minister, witness in love, and be built up in maturity and in numbers. But if fellowship is not right, the church will decline and eventually die. If the fellowship is right, the church can work through any problem and continue to grow. But if the fellowship is disrupted, attendance will drop, giving will decrease, and outreach will stop. Building fellowship is crucial to the growth of a church.¹⁷

It seems that in the last few years, evangelical Christians have been less interested in the question of church unity. Too often church members and leaders become negative, defensive, and ready to bring up objections and difficulties. In *The Safest Place on Earth*, Crabb emphasizes that churches are rarely communities. More often, they are social machines that run smoothly for a while, break down, and then are fixed so they run smoothly

¹⁶ Larry Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 37.

¹⁷ Darrell W. Robinson, *Total Church Life* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 42.

again or noisily chug along as best they can.¹⁸ But if a church is to grow and be healthy, the question of church unity is a priority, because, as Everett Ferguson writes, division is clearly branded a sin (Gal 5:19-21).¹⁹

Marks of Inappropriate Approach to Fellowship

Weak corporate prayer. A common characteristic of this generation is the tendency to pray less and less during common worship. On many occasions, common prayer is limited to a small number of people. But lack of corporate prayer leads to lack of corporate boldness and corporate dependence. According to David Peterson, Christians are mutually dependent on one another, and they are collectively dependent on Jesus Christ for life and power. Christians meet together to benefit from the relationships and ministries they can share with one another.²⁰ In the book of Acts, we read that the early believers devoted themselves to prayer together. And prayer among New Testament believers was usually in the context of human relationships. Prayer was a corporate experience of common worship.

A weak personal relationship with Jesus. Biblical fellowship is twofold: it is vertical fellowship with God, and it is horizontal fellowship with others.

¹⁸ Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth*, xiv. One of Crabb's assumptions is that a spiritual community is a safer place than a professional community. In a real community, people know each other and relate in ways that only God's Spirit makes possible.

¹⁹ Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 400-401. Ferguson argues that since Christ is one, the church must be one also. Christian unity derives from the cross of Christ. He also presents several arguments for unity: the one God and Father is the ultimate foundation of unity; the one Lord, Jesus, is the instrument of God's creation; there is one Spirit, who unites all in baptism; there is one body in which all in Christ are placed; there is one faith confessed by the people of God; there is one baptism; and there is one hope toward which Christians strive and that sustains them.

²⁰ David Peterson, *Engaging with God* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 208.

And when the vertical fellowship is weak, there will be weak fellowship among the body. If our fellowship and peace with God are not right, then regardless of our good intentions, our fellowship with one another will be wrong.

Inappropriate personal relationship with Jesus Christ hinders the church from authentic fellowship. According to Scripture, from beginning to end, Jesus' mission was that of peacemaker. Long before he was born, he was given the title Prince of peace (Isa 9:6). The apostle Paul exclaimed, "For he himself is our peace" (Eph 2:14). Jesus sacrificed his life on the cross to reconcile us with God, so that we could experience peace²¹ and fellowship with God and with one another. Therefore, genuine fellowship is not possible unless every Christian will pursue fellowship with Jesus.

Insufficient teaching about unity. All Christian leaders recognize the significance and the importance of unity in the church. But it seems that there is insufficient teaching about it. The book of Acts says explicitly that the early church was devoted to fellowship and the apostles' teaching; fellowship and teaching go together and are indispensable. An inappropriate attitude toward God's Word hinders healthy church growth, because, Jesus said, "if you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples" (John 8:31).

Competition and conflicts among church leaders. Competition among church pastors or leaders is a sign of inappropriate church fellowship. There are people who would argue that competition among leaders is natural and

²¹ Ken Sande, *Peace Maker* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 44. There are three dimensions to the peace that God offers to us through Christ: peace with God, peace with one another, and peace with ourselves. In Sande's opinion, many people care little about their relationship with God and other people, but they still want peace within themselves. It is impossible to know genuine peace unless a person also pursues peace with God and others.

necessary, and at first glance, this may seem right. But most of the time, competition follows from human, personal desires. Those desires cause fights and conflicts among teams, and finally the conflict affects the church's health and growth. The apostle James said, "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?" (Jas 4:1).

Henri Nouwen speaks about three dangers facing a church minister. First is the danger of concretism; second is the danger of power; third is the danger of pride. And to avoid concretism, power, and pride, the minister has to live with a perspective of hope, receptivity, and shared responsibility, all of which mean that he must be a contemplative man.²² A leader who does not leave a contemplative life will abound in a manipulative way of life.

Stephen Macchia emphasizes that healthy teams cooperate rather than compete. In his opinion, we forget that there is only one enemy that every single Christian ministry team is fighting against—the enemy of our souls. The only acceptable competition on a team is against that enemy, because in the Christian community, the only acceptable option among teams and team members is cooperation.²³

One of the chief obstacles of church healthy growth is the lack of unity among church leaders, church members, and even among churches. Some Christians try to argue that the lack of unity is a normal and necessary thing. Their usual answer is that while they disagree on many issues, they agree on

²² Henry J. M. Nouwen, *Creative Ministry* (New York: Doubleday, 1978), 88. His book is a powerful and helpful volume for everyone who is involved in ministry.

²³ Stephen A. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Team* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 21.

the essentials (that Jesus is Lord and Savior and that we are saved through him by faith alone are two of the most common beliefs that are considered essential). The problem, however, is that Scripture repeatedly tells us to be one unified body, and it never mentions makes a distinction between the essentials and the nonessentials. Jesus prayed to the Father for the unity of all of his future followers. Not only does he want us all to be one, but he wants us all to be one as he and the Father are one. He and the Father are one God, one being, and we are all to be one body of Christ (1 Cor 12:18-21).

Factions inside the church. Another sign of weak fellowship is factions in the church. To identify church factions is a difficult thing. But if those factions are not eliminated, they will cause dissension among church members and even church leaders. And according to the New Testament, factions are not the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:20). Church history shows that many churches were broken and lost their power because there were factions. The church at Corinth had serious problems, but of all its problems, the one that Paul addressed first was that of division. He begins his letter with an exhortation: “I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers, some from Chloe’s household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, ‘I follow Paul’; another, ‘I follow Apollos’; another, ‘I follow Cephas’; still another, ‘I

follow Christ.' Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?" (1 Cor 1:10-13)

Unresolved and ignored conflicts. Unresolved conflicts create great tensions in Christian' lives.²⁴ As Ken Sande writes, "Conflict is often much more expensive than we expect it to be. And unresolved conflict can lead to many types of 'prisons' and can exact penalties we never anticipate."²⁵ In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God" (Matt 5:9). Commenting on this passage, Peter Scazzero says this is one tragically misinterpreted verse from the New Testament. In his opinion, most people think that Jesus calls us to be pacifiers and appeasers who ensure that nobody gets upset. We are to keep the peace, ignoring difficult issues and problems, making sure things remain stable and serene.²⁶

There are many reasons²⁷ why church conflicts arise. But the predominant reason involves competing agendas where something deeply personal is at stake.²⁸ And this truth is confirmed by the apostle James: "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have,

²⁴ Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* (Nashville: Integrity Publishing, 2006), 186.

²⁵ Sande, *Peace Maker*, 90. Sande also argues that unresolved conflicts, in addition to robbing time, property, or money, can damage relationships and destroy reputations.

²⁶ Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, 184.

²⁷ Sande, *Peace Maker*, 80. He argues that conflicts generally involve two kinds of issues: material and personal. Material issues involve substantive matters such as property, money, rights, and responsibilities; personal issues relate to what goes on inside or between persons. These matters involve attitudes and feelings toward others that result from how we have treated one another.

²⁸ Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth*, 50.

because you do not ask God" (Jas 4:1-2). Commenting on this passage, Sande notes that conflict always begins with some kind of desire and usually starts in the heart.²⁹

In churches, there may be unresolved conflicts among staff or leaders. In the opinion of Gary McIntosh and Samuel D. Rima, the great majority of conflicts in leadership are the result of a leader's sensibilities being offended, his ideas being rejected, his being outperformed by a staff member or not receiving the attention and respect he feels he deserves, and various other petty issues.³⁰

The church is a gathering of people from varying backgrounds and with different personalities and different spiritual levels. Therefore, it is inevitable that such a group of people will experience conflicts. Crabb says that conflict is latent in every human relationship at every moment.³¹ Many church members and leaders are tempted to think that time heals every conflict and dissension. It is true that time might heal many problems, but time will not heal all pains and conflicts.

Therefore, conflicts that are not resolved in the right time and according to the principles of the New Testament will hinder a church's healthy growth. And usually such conflicts affect the image and the witness of that church. As Crabb noted, the presence of the conflict does not necessarily define an unspiritual community, just as the absence of conflict is not proof of

²⁹ Sande, *Peace Maker*, 101-2. Sande comments that when we judge others and condemn them in our hearts for not meeting our desires, we are imitating the devil (see Jas 3:15; 4:7).

³⁰ Gary L. McIntosh and Samuel D. Rima Sr., *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), 145.

³¹ Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth*, 40.

a spiritual community. The difference between a spiritual and an unspiritual community, says Crabb, is not whether conflict exists but in our attitude toward it and our approach to handling it. When conflict is seen as an opportunity to draw more fully on spiritual resources, we have the makings of a spiritual community.³² And conflict is a problem, argues Crabb, that only a spiritual community can handle.³³

Macchia also argues that conflict is cancerous; therefore, “it cannot be ignored or neglected any longer.”³⁴ As Sande emphasized, “When your life is filled with unresolved conflict and broken relationships, you will have little success in sharing the good news about Jesus’ saving work on the cross.”³⁵ Reggie McNeal argues that God uses conflict to shape the leader’s heart. However, many spiritual leaders prove to be allergic to conflict.³⁶

Church members’ independence and indifference toward others.

Another sign of weak fellowship is members’ indifference toward the needs

³² Ibid. Crabb also says that unspiritual communities are marked by the presence of conflicted relationships handled by congenial relationships, cooperative relationships, consoling relationships and, as needed, counseling relationships or conforming relationships. Such communities are characterized by the dependence of the flesh.

³³ Ibid., 49.

³⁴ Stephen Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 106-7. Resolving conflicts “begins with an honest assessment of our heart in line with Scripture.” According to Macchia, in such situations, we need to meditate on passages such as Romans 12:9-18, 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a, Ephesians 4:22-32, Colossians 3:12-17, Hebrews 12:1-3, and James 3:13-18. Then our hearts will be prepared to address lovingly the conflict at hand.

³⁵ Sande, *Peace Maker*, 47; he argues that since peace and unity are essential to an effective Christian witness, Satan, whose name means “adversary,” will promote conflicts in many ways. Satan tempts us so we give in to greed and dishonesty (Acts 5:3); he deceives and misleads us (2 Tim 2:25-26), and he takes advantage of unresolved anger (Eph 4:26-27). Worst of all, he uses false teachers to propagate values and philosophies that encourage selfishness and stimulate controversy (1 Tim 4:1-3).

³⁶ Reggie McNeal, *A Work of Heart* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 155. Spiritual leaders must welcome conflict as a heart-shaping tool of God.

and burdens of others and the prevalence of individualism.³⁷ And as Bill Thrall, Bruce McNicol, and Ken McElrath argue, “We all influence others. We can’t escape it.”³⁸ Macchia says, “I have found that one of the greatest sins of the Christian church today is an independent spirit.”³⁹ We live in a self-preoccupied world, and when church members are preoccupied only with their own interests, this will hinder the church’s fellowship and growth. In such circumstances, the word of the apostle Paul to the Philippians reminds us, “If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:1-5). Therefore, broken fellowship in a local church hobbles its ministry and prevents or restricts growth, and Jesus is not glorified.

But regardless of the outcomes of these problems in communication and conversation, church leaders and members must remain firmly committed

³⁷ Henry J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 55. The author mentions that in today’s churches it is easy to see the prevalence of individualism among ministers and priests. But, as the author concludes, ministry is not only a communal experience; it is also a mutual experience.

³⁸ Bill Thrall, Bruce McNicol, and Ken McElrath, *The Ascent of a Leader* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 10. The authors examine the process of developing character in our leaders, our relationships, our community, and our lives. According to their perspective, authentic leaders influence community and others through a life of significance.

³⁹ Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church*, 29. “If we are to fully understand and experience God’s empowering presence in our lives, we need to release our independent spirits into his loving care.”

to authentic fellowship. We must demonstrate our willingness to follow Christ's teachings on unity. The church's witness to the world depends on the church's unity. In praying for the people who would be brought to God's kingdom through the work of his disciples, Jesus said, "May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:23). We have been given a ministry of reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ. If we lose sight of this calling, if we have no commitment to authentic fellowship, it will be difficult to see peace, love, and unity in our churches.

Inappropriate Approach to Ministry

A significant obstacle to church growth is an inappropriate attitude toward ministry, either on the part of a leader or a church member. When ministry is not accomplished according to God's plan and standards, than that ministry hinders growth.

Marks of Inappropriate Approach to Ministry

New Testament teaching and the survey of pastors in Moldova identify several marks of inadequate church ministry.

Indifference toward church ministries. According to the survey of pastors in Moldova, 90% of them indicated that members' indifference, lack of dedication, passivity, and lack of involvement is an obstacle to church growth. These attitudes and behaviors happen because church leaders do not take

enough time to help church members to discover their gifts for ministry. Many members are ready to serve, but they do not know what to do. And this leads finally to indifference. Also, there are indifferent members who feel comfortable about doing nothing. Growing churches understand that to serve God is not an option for followers of Christ. Serving God is not even an attribute or a task only for those who have been called to lead in the church. Every church member's involvement is a key factor for healthy church growth.

The church's ministry is perceived as a job or a position. McIntosh and Rima conclude:

How easy it is for us as spiritual leaders to use our ministry positions and the people we have been called to lead to advance our own goals and meet our own neurotic needs. The constant flow of failures among Christian leaders today in every denomination threatens the fabric of the church of Jesus Christ. Our credibility is being eroded among the people we have been called to reach because scores of failures among Christian leaders have created a cynicism within our culture toward the church.⁴⁰

This statement proves once again that this perspective on ministry hinders authentic ministry and finally hinders church growth. Among our generation, there is a temptation to view ministry calls as a position for satisfying human selfishness. Gilbert Bilezikian notes that according to the New Testament, leadership is a servant ministry, based on spiritual gifts and always plural.⁴¹ Therefore, an inadequate theology of ministry leads the church in an

⁴⁰ McIntosh and Rima, *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership*, 214.

⁴¹ Gilbert Bilezikian, *Community 101* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 130. He discusses all of these components of leadership (130-86).

inappropriate direction. It encourages a wrong example for young people, and finally it discourages many church members from service and involvement.

Human-centered ministry. In chapter 3 it was mentioned that authentic church ministry must be Christ-centered because “from him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Eph 4:16). And apart from him we can do nothing (John 15:4-5). Thus, the ministry is not about us; it is “from him and through him and in him,” and therefore all that we do must be accomplished only for his glory (Rom 11:36).

Human-centered ministry points everything to human leaders. And as McIntosh and Rima emphasize, this approach may lead the ministry to a battle with pride, selfishness, self-deception, and wrong motives.⁴² According to them, these four aspects cause some leaders to stumble tragically in ministry.

The first sign of an inadequate ministry is the desire to maintain absolute control. Such leaders look for approval from those in authority; they are tempted to control every church activity and be aware of every small decision. An in the end, as McIntosh and Rima say, such leaders become

⁴² McIntosh and Rima, *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership*, 51. The authors also speak about some of most significant causes of failure among leaders. One definitive sign of the dark side of ministry is that some leaders are driven by the desire to make a significant mark with their lives. And this vaguer sense of ambition is a sign that the dark side is alive and well. Second, some leaders experience a profound need to be approved by those they lead and to know that they are accepted and appreciated. Third, others are driven by an irrational fear that their work is not adequate, so they are driven to work even harder and longer to prevent their irrational fear from becoming a reality. Fourth, others are driven by the need to feel in absolute control of every circumstances and event. And finally, other leaders are driven by a tendency toward perfectionism.

"workaholics."⁴³ They continue, "Though all of the above behaviors are done under the guise of serving God and doing our best for Lord, which is very admirable, in reality it is all done in an attempt to meet and satisfy the leader's unhealthy need."⁴⁴

The second sign of an inadequate ministry is the desire to be admired and acclaimed, an approach that leads to an obsession with self-image. Such leaders are more preoccupied with church members' approval and admiration than with Christ's approval. These leaders may bring to the church their ideas, plans, and projects, but they want to be sure that everybody knows that these things are "my own." McIntosh and Rima argue that many churches have been destroyed by leaders who led the church into projects too energetic and costly for the congregation, because the leader was preoccupied about his authority and name.⁴⁵ And when a church leader or a church member approaches ministry as a platform from which to launch himself or herself on a career path, the church will suffer and its growth will be hindered.

The third sign of an inadequate ministry is the desire to please everybody. Such people are willing to cover up all problems rather than face them. Such a leader is often willing to take responsibility for inappropriate attitudes and actions of others; these leaders react rather than act.⁴⁶

⁴³ Ibid., 87-89. Such leaders are compulsive leaders who are excessively devoted to work, often becoming workaholics. They work inordinate hours, to the detriment of their family, and establish an unhealthy example and environment for staff members.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 89-90.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 99.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 123-24.

Human-centered ministry approaches ministry as a position for leading others and not serving them with humility, as Jesus did. And such a perspective looks always for human benefits from that ministry and personalizes the ministry. For example, we often express such as “the vision of my church,” “my personal vision for the church,” or “my plan and my strategy.” But, according to the New Testament, we must remember that leadership is a divine call and privilege, not a right. Therefore, the essence of Christian leadership is the courage and willingness to give and share, not the desire to rule, control, or to be admired and to possess. According to the New Testament, no human is ever designated as sole leader of a church or as its head. No allowance is ever made in Scripture for any individual to proclaim himself the head of the church. Headship and control belong to Christ alone. And he brings about everything good in his church.

In *How to Break Growth Barriers*, Carl George writes that most churches are overmanaged and underled. Consequently, pastors are obsessed with doing things right rather than with doing the right things. They are more attentive to efficiency than to effectiveness.⁴⁷

Authentic ministry always is Christ-centered, not ego-centered; it is grounded in the Word of God, not on human principles, strategies, plans, or abilities. And an effective ministry is empowered by the Holy Spirit. As George says, “Performance abilities alone usually cannot grow a church.”⁴⁸ From

⁴⁷ Carl F. George, *How to Break Growth Barriers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993), 156.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 72.

Scripture, it is obvious that the Holy Spirit empowers Christians to serve and do God's ministry.

Calvin Miller reminds us that God made us to love people and use things. And Miller asks, "Why is it that we so often love things and use people?" Then he argues that God longs to raise up those rare Christ-filled leaders who use their might to create right rather than claim that their might is right. He longs for leaders who wield the politics of grace rather than those who become graceful politicians. God wants to raise up leaders who, united with Christ, become in all issues of decision making indistinguishable from Christ.⁴⁹

Inappropriate Approach to Evangelism

One of the most visible signs that a church is not healthy and is not growing is neglect of sharing the Good News of Christ. By its nature, the church is called by the Lord of the harvest to share the Good News. For a growing church, evangelism is not an option. It is much more than that, and it is an act filled with passion for unsaved people.

According to the survey of pastors in Moldova, Christians' indifference toward unsaved people hinders a church from healthy growth. About 90% of those who were surveyed agreed that passivity is among the greatest hindrances to church growth. Among Christians, there persists a profound

⁴⁹ Calvin Miller, *The Empowered Leader* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 131-34. Miller speaks about five evidences of abuse of power: giving up those disciplines we demand of underlings; believing that others owe us whatever use we can make of them; trying to fix things rather than make things right; closing our minds to every suggestion that we could be out of line; and believing that people in our way are expendable.

unconcern toward lost people. In many instances, evangelism is inadequate by God's standards and to the need of the world.

Marks of Inappropriate Approach to Evangelism

Evangelism is optional. One inappropriate approach to evangelism is to think that evangelism is an option for specific Christian organizations or a limited number of skilled people. Such an attitude ignores God's call for every local church to witness to Christ where it is. And when a church neglects its call to be salt and light for the world, when the church flees from the responsibility of sharing Christ's good news, that church will not grow but hinders others from receiving God's love and light.

A poor reputation. According to the survey, 80% of the pastors said that a poor Christian testimony is an obstacle to healthy church growth. A good reputation in the community is a powerful evangelistic tool. In their desire to attract more people, many churches waive principles, even those principles pertaining to their identity and God's call. They were trying to create a wide enough door so that everybody would feel comfortable and relaxed in that community but not necessarily changed. When the local church waives divine standards, then that church loses its divine identity and purpose in the world. The church is not called to be what society wants to be; it is called to be what society needs. And when a church compromises its nature and call, it hinders its growth. It is true that Jesus sent his followers into the world, but to be in the world but not of it requires the church to understand the surrounding

culture and to resist its idolatries.⁵⁰ And when the church tries to be something other than the church, it loses credibility with the community.⁵¹

Marginalization from the world. Paul Borthwick argues that an examination of the Christian world might lead observers to conclude that the mission of the church is to make sure that Christians are happy and content—"insular" Christianity, in which Christians focus on their spiritual health, fellowship, and doctrinal purity, often at the expense of interaction with the world.⁵²

A short time ago, this author was speaking with a husband whose wife recently accepted Jesus and became a member of Jesus Savior Church. This man said, "I observe that you evangelicals are very self-preoccupied Christians. You don't have time for others, just for yourself. For instance, most of my wife's time is spent in the church, in the building. What do you do for the city?" At that moment, God again reminded the author that the world desperately needs churches that are ready to share light and blessings with every one. However, as Borthwick says, we often get so caught up in activities related to the church that we unintentionally marginalize ourselves from the world.⁵³ Yet the church is the only institution on earth mandated by its Lord and raised up to share his Good News with all nations.

Human-centered evangelism. In chapter 3 it was emphasized that authentic evangelism must be Christ-centered. Our salvation is only through

⁵⁰ Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, 41.

⁵¹ Robert White, *Healthy Kingdom Churches* (Friendswood, TX: Baxter Press, 2002), 148-49.

⁵² Paul Borthwick, *Stop Witnessing and Start Loving* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2003), 54-55.

⁵³ Ibid., 54.

the blood of Jesus Christ; he is the greatest example of how to evangelize; Jesus is the Lord of the harvest; and Jesus commanded and mandated his followers to go into the world and share his Good News. Human-centered evangelism replaces Jesus' person and authority with the person and authority of the evangelist. And the ultimate glory is brought to the person, not to Jesus.

Evangelism that is not grounded in the Word of God. Because the Bible has a divine origin, it must be seen as a unique revelation from God. And the essence of church growth is to communicate to a lost world the living Word so that God's church may grow. Only a divinely given Bible could give us without error the written story of Jesus Christ and his commands, including his Great Commission.⁵⁴ According to New Testament teaching, the Word of God "is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Heb 4:12). Therefore, healthy church growth is a result of proclaiming a Savior who is known through the written Word.

Authentic evangelism must be grounded in the Word of God because its message contains the living Word of God. Evangelism that only informs and does not confront people with the entire truth of God's holy Word is inappropriate. There is a tendency to preach less about sin and preach more a gospel with no repentance. And when the gospel is not presented in its complete form, that will become an obstacle to healthy church growth. Or it

⁵⁴ Thomas S. Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1993), 88.

may cause unhealthy growth, because there is no substitute for the Word of God, which is able to change people's hearts and lives. Human ideas and philosophies will end, but only the Word of God stands forever. And as Thomas Rainer says, because of the clear, biblical claims of the exclusiveness of salvation through Christ, churches must not be tempted to open the door of salvation any wider than the person of Jesus Christ.⁵⁵ Church growth that does not come through the narrow way of Christ is not true or healthy church growth.

Evangelism that is not followed by the power of the Holy Spirit. All authentic evangelism must be empowered by the Holy Spirit because people are born again only through the work of the Spirit. When the role of God's Spirit is neglected or minimized in the evangelistic process, then that evangelism might change people's emotions and feelings but not their hearts and lives. Macchia emphasizes that the first and most essential tool for the church's outward focus is the powerful work of the Holy Spirit. In his opinion, too often Christians tend to think they can fix their problem on their own. And, he concludes, "unfortunately, we translate this pragmatic optimism to the work of evangelism as well."⁵⁶ This human pragmatism becomes an obstacle to authentic evangelism, because the work of conviction and life change is accomplished only by the supreme work of God's Spirit.

According to Bilezikian, another inappropriate approach to evangelism is the "transposition of the methods of mass evangelism to the level of

⁵⁵ Ibid., 101.

⁵⁶ Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church*, 145.

interpersonal encounters. Too many lay evangelists are being trained to quick-draw unbelievers with a barrage of Bible verses or spiritual laws in order to bring them to an immediate decision for Christ.”⁵⁷

Another sign of an inappropriate attitude toward evangelism is the lack of passion for lost people. In Borthwick’s opinion, at least three things smother our passion. Bitterness destroys our passion to know Jesus. Our desire for security waters down our passion. And a third passion-buster is materialism.⁵⁸

Therefore, it is important that the work of evangelism is done in and through the power of the Holy Spirit. There is no name other than that of Jesus by which people can be saved. There is no other message than his, and there is no other power to change people than the power of the Holy Spirit.

CONCLUSION

An overview of the survey of pastors from Moldova demonstrates once again the difficulty of compiling a complete or final list of obstacles to healthy church growth. But at the same time, this survey reveals that there are some specific, universal factors that hinder healthy church growth. These factors

⁵⁷ Bilezikian, *Community* 101, 147. Bilezikian says that Scripture suggests an approach that is accessible to every believer, even to those who do not have the gift of evangelism. It consists of establishing authentic, disinterested, and nonmanipulative friendships with potential seekers and allowing the Holy Spirit to use the association in his own time and in his own way as a vehicle for Christian witness.

⁵⁸ Borthwick, *Stop Witnessing and Start Loving*, 27-28. Borthwick argues that the societal desire for more and more material possessions douses the fire of passion. We spend our energy on earning, spending, accumulating, and collecting. Finally, we lack the energy and passion to be 100 percent devoted to knowing Jesus Christ.

are internal rather than external, and these internal factors are the most significant obstacles to growth. These factors merit more study.

A careful analysis of these internal factors reveals that they are linked directly or indirectly with two major issues: the church's identity and purpose. All of these factors are associated with the church's worship, discipleship, fellowship, service, and evangelism. When the church's divine purposes are altered, this will affect all church's doing and being. Inadequacies in worship, discipleship, fellowship, service, or evangelism will hinder healthy church growth.

Healthy, growing churches understand church growth can be hindered. Therefore, it is important to learn how to recognize these obstacles and overcome them. The next chapter will set forth a list of key principles of church growth that have been discovered during research and after analyzing obstacles to church growth.

Chapter 5

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR HEALTHY CHURCH GROWTH

In the previous chapter, through analysis of Scripture and the survey, we identified the most significant obstacles to church growth. And healthy, growing churches understand how important is to eliminate or overcome those obstacles. But it is not enough only to identify the obstacles. In other words, a healthy, growing church not only needs to understand what not to do; it also needs to know and understand how to grow.

This chapter will set out a list of key church growth principles that have been discovered during research and study. It will present a vision for healthy church growth for Eastern Europe, and especially for Moldova. Before examining the most significant traits of healthy, growing churches, it is helpful and necessary to reflect on some inadequate approaches to church growth.

INADEQUATE APPROACHES TO CHURCH GROWTH

Well-implemented Plans and Programs

A contemporary tendency is to seek success by focusing on means rather than on God. The temptation is to get caught up in methods and programs of church growth and to forget the more fundamental spiritual issues, such as what we are growing toward and from whom truly authentic church growth comes.

In the last decades, many books have been written about church growth. All the authors intended to describe the marks of a growing church and what promotes church growth. The majority of the authors studied successful and growing congregations. Therefore, their content and research have been influenced by that context. Most of those authors had good intentions and material that inspired and challenged many churches to desire growth, and many churches have been blessed with growth. But at the same time, many Christian leaders have been discouraged, even confused, because the result was not the one they expected to obtain. Many thought that a simple application of those plans and programs in their community would cause church growth, but the reality was different. And this fact motivates us to understand that church growth is something more than a simple program or plan.

Hard-working, Well-trained, and Professionally Equipped Staff

Some people that think the more efficient the staff is, the more growth a church can expect to see. There is no doubt that well-equipped, mature people are significant elements in a growing church. But to base church growth on these things is an inappropriate approach. Many churches have a great staff, but the church stagnates. By contrast, churches with a weak staff, from a postmodern perspective, grow and advance. Of course, hard work is wonderful; well-trained staff and good intentions are priceless. But for a church to grow authentically, it needs God.

Unconcern with Quantitative Growth

One view is that healthy church growth must not be preoccupied with quantitative growth. According to this perspective, church growth has to do with the inner character of church members. And often these people are tempted to judge those for whom church growth is qualitative and quantitative. But the truth is that God cares about numbers; therefore an authentic, Christ-centered, Word-grounded, and Spirit-empowered church should also care about numbers. If a church refuses to concern itself with the number of people it reaches for the Lord, then that church underestimates the Lord's Great Commission (Matt 28; Acts 1:8).

Dependence Exclusively on Prayer

According to this theory, there is nothing we can do when we speak about church growth. The unique thing that we must do is to pray. And if we pray, God will add people to his church. There is no doubt that in all growing churches, prayer is a basic element of the church's life, and all that people do as a church is submitted to prayer. But in growing churches, God requires both prayer and action, and as a result of that God makes the church grow and advance. Jesus' disciples did not just pray and ask God to bring people to them so that they could preach the Good News. Rather, they went into the world and preached the gospel to every nation.

Not Dependant on Our Efforts

God is the source of all healthy church growth, and as human beings without Jesus we can do nothing to contribute to church growth. But to eliminate the responsibility of God's people for church growth is an inappropriate and unbiblical approach. According to the Scriptures, we, as God's fellow workers, are called to plant and water the seed, and he will cause the growth.

The preceding principles represent some approaches taken by church leaders around the world. And although an element of truth exists in each of them, these approaches alone are inadequate to produce authentic church growth.

Donald McGavran, the founder of America's church growth movement, once asked a minister to share the main reasons for his church's growth. The minister's answer was, "We preach the Bible as the Word of God and are faithful to it." Then McGavran asked another pastor why he thought his church had not grown for the last ten years. And this was his answer: "We preach the Bible as the Word of God and are faithful to it."¹ These answers are classic examples that prove church growth cannot be produced by humans. Christians are vehicles of church growth, but they are not the source of it. As C. Peter Wagner observes, "It may not be obvious at first, but it is a fact that many pastors of growing churches have only a vague insight into the reasons

¹ Cited in C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1971), 47.

why their churches are growing.”² In other words, church growth is more than a program or a philosophy; it is a divine work.

PRINCIPLES OF HEALTHY CHURCH GROWTH

This last section of the thesis identifies the results and findings of Scripture research, the survey, and a literature review. These findings lead toward practical principles for healthy church growth in Moldova. The author admits that these principles are not a complete or a comprehensive list of all church growth principles, but the following ones have been discovered as being essential for church growth in Moldova, and they are essential for every growing church.

A Biblical Identity

First, healthy, growing churches have biblical identity. A healthy, growing church is preoccupied first of all with its being. The nature or being of the church is expressed in its divine identity, and a church without a biblical identity is not an authentic church. Without this identity, it would dissolve into its surrounding societal environment.

Healthy, growing churches search for their identity in God’s revealed Word (see chapter 2). As God’s people, the church’s value and identity result from its position in Christ. Therefore, authentic church growth takes place when by faith we understand what we already are in Christ (our identity).

² Ibid., 46.

Healthy, growing churches oppose worldly values and identities. A healthy, growing church will keep its being, indifferent to historical context. Such a church will not compromise its identity and message, because these were designated by Lord. Their message will be filled with love and forgiveness but will confront people with their real situation and need for repentance. In Romans 1:18-32, Paul spoke of the battle line drawn between the church and the world. An authentic church does not become what the world wants; rather, it is what the world needs. The temptation to be a popular church might compromise its identity and capacity to be the church that God wants. An authentic church identity has three main marks.

Centered in Christ

The possibility of knowing a church's true identity is grounded in Jesus. Jesus already knows his church and has established its value and works. Therefore, for healthy church growth, knowing Jesus and being in him is an absolute condition. The true church's identity is not linked with a human name, because there is only one name, a name that is above every name, Jesus Christ (Phil 2:9-11). As Gary L. McIntosh and Samuel D. Rima emphasize, "It is not our achievements and organizational success that give us a lasting sense of worth—it is Jesus Christ."³

Miroslav Volf writes that a church is an assembly, but an assembly is not yet the church. An indispensable condition of ecclesiality is that people

³ Gary L. McIntosh and Samuel D. Rima Sr., *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), 209.

assemble in the name of Christ. Gathering in the name of Christ is the precondition for the presence of Christ in the Holy Spirit, which is itself constitutive for church.⁴ Jesus said, “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Matt 18:20).

The priority for every growing church and for every growing Christian is to give Christ first place in everything. He produced all things for himself (Col 1:16-18), he precedes all things (Col 1:17); he preserves all things (Col 1:17), and he purposed to be first in all things (Col 1:18). “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing¹ her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Eph 5:25-27). In other words, as Dallas Willard argues, the exclusive, primary goal of a local congregation is church’s spiritual formation in Christ-likeness.⁵

Jesus said, “I will build my church” (Matt 16:18). That is why authentic, healthy church growth is concerned only with the growth of Christ’s church. Therefore, as Thomas S. Rainer says, any belief system that gives other claims to the church must be rejected.⁶ According to the New Testament, “there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved”

⁴ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 145. Volf explains that the “name of Jesus Christ” unequivocally identifies the person around whom those in the church gather.

⁵ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 235.

⁶ Thomas S. Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1993), 101.

(Acts 4:12). And Jesus made it explicit that he is the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through him (John 14:6).

As the head is the center of our lives, so Christ must be given preeminence. The head is always the one who gives directions; the body or the members are those who must willingly receive the orders. The growing church today must know how to listen to its head and how to respond when direction is given.⁷

When Paul speaks about Christ's relationship with his church, the apostle noted that Christ loved the church in a supernatural way (Eph 5:25-27). And according to Paul's teaching, Jesus gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers to build up the church, "until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4:12-13).

The centerpiece of biblical revelation is Jesus Christ. From Genesis to Revelation, it is all about him.⁸ That is why the doctrine of Christ is a central doctrine of the church growth movement.⁹ There is no other more important factor for a growing church than to be a Christ-centered church. When Christ is not in the center of a church's being, that gathering could be named a group or a community but not an authentic church where Christ is exalted.

⁷ Elmer L. Towns, John N. Vaughan, and David J. Seifert, *The Complete Book of Church Growth* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1981), 226.

⁸ Larry Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 168.

⁹ Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth*, 101.

Grounded in the Word of God

Healthy, growing churches understand and believe that the most infallible source of knowing and understanding the church's identity is the revealed Word of God. In the New Testament, teaching about church's identity is abundant. For a growing church, all its being flows from the Word, and it is based on the Word of God. Rainer warns that a potential danger of enthusiasm and pragmatism regarding church growth is elucidating principles without scriptural foundation.¹⁰ Healthy, growing churches understand and believe that God's Word must not be altered, underestimated, or neglected. Principles for growth must be in harmony with the Word of God.

Healthy, growing churches understand and believe that God's Word is the most powerful and divine element for authentic growth. Jesus prayed for his disciples, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17). Also, Paul teaches that "all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17). In other words, there are no sources for the church's sanctification process other than the living and holy Word of God.

Healthy, growing churches understand and believe that God's Word is the most powerful tool that penetrates hearts and adds people to Christ's church. In Hebrews 4:12 it is said, "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."

¹⁰ Ibid., 87.

Rainer argues that the written Word is powerful, penetrating hearts that may be added to God's kingdom and his church.¹¹

Healthy, growing churches understand and believe that God's Word will stand forever. God's principles never change. Everything will fall, but the Word of the Lord stands forever (1 Pet 1:25). Thus, healthy, growing churches are committed and faithful to read the Word, to hear the Word, and to follow God's Word (Rev 1:3).

Healthy, growing churches understand and believe that nothing from this world can be substituted for God's Word. When Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-five Theses on the door at Wittenberg in 1517, he outlined his opposition to the abuses of the Roman Catholic Church. Luther held to the principle *sola Scriptura*: Scripture alone is authoritative. Neither the church nor the councils could speak above the authority of God's Word. When the tools of the social sciences are used to discern ways to reach more people, those tools must not be the authority, but rather instruments that are subject to the authority of Scripture. Leaders of the Reformation viewed neither the church nor the councils as inherently evil, but these organizations became evil when they abandoned the parameters of Scripture. The tools of church growth are not inherently evil; but those tools must always be within the bounds of Scripture and subject to biblical authority.¹²

As a church grows in the knowledge of God's Word, his grace and blessings will bring abundance to that church.

¹¹ Ibid., 89.

¹² Ibid., 89-90. Rainer includes a chapter about Bibliology and church growth.

Empowered by the Holy Spirit

Healthy church growth has its origin in God and is dependent on the grace and on the power of God. Healthy, growing churches understand and believe that the Holy Spirit's guidance is indispensable for knowing and understanding the church's being and doing. Jesus told his followers that the Holy Spirit would come to guide them in all truth (John 16:13) and promised, "The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you" (John 14:26).

John Stott argues that a Spirit-filled church is concerned about the apostles' teaching and instruction. A Spirit-filled church is an apostolic church, a New Testament church, eager to believe and obey what Jesus and his apostles taught.¹³ In the Spirit, the Father and the Son take possession of the church. Nothing from God's past revelation is lost.¹⁴ Growing churches understand that God's spirit is indispensable for knowing and understanding his will for the church. And Gil Rendle and Alice Mann argue that a primary responsibility of leaders is to help the congregation understand where it is going, why such a direction is important, and how to get there.¹⁵ According to David Benner, "spiritual direction is a prayer process in which a person seeking help in cultivating a deeper personal relationship with God meets with

¹³ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1990), 87.

¹⁴ Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 51.

¹⁵ Gil Rendle and Alice Mann, *Holy Conversation* (Washington, DC: The Alban Institute, 2003), xi-xiv. The authors speak about planning as an opportunity of discernment. Planning is conversation because it truly is dialogue. Also, conversation is holy because, at its best, it is about people's understanding of their identity as a faith community, their sense of purpose, and their relationship with God.

another for prayer and conversation that is focused on increasing awareness of God in the midst of live experiences and facilitating surrender to God's will.”¹⁶

Healthy, growing churches understand and believe that conversion of sinners is the work of the Holy Spirit (1 Pet 1:25). In other words, the Holy Spirit is the inner voice that tells the sinner that his or her life is not congruent with the Word of God. And without that knowledge, a person has no motivation and strength to seek God's forgiveness and salvation.

Healthy, growing churches understand and believe that God's Holy Spirit is an indispensable factor for healthy church growth. Without the presence and work of the Holy Spirit, church growth has no hope. As human beings, we depend upon God's Spirit for our salvation, our wisdom in decisions, strength, and spiritual growth. Jesus said to his disciples, “I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment” (John 16:7-8). And Paul told the Corinthians, we “are being transformed into his [Christ's] likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18). Scripture says that as people of God, we have been chosen in Christ (Eph 1:11). Then Paul continues, “And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him

¹⁶ David G. Benner and Lawrence J. Crabb, *Sacred Companions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 94. The authors examine the four basic components of this definition.

with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory" (Eph 1:13-14). In Romans we are told, "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory" (Rom 8:16-17).

Healthy, growing churches understand and believe that God's Holy Spirit empowers the body of Christ for authentic worship. The presence and the powerful divine work of God's Spirit are indispensable for biblical worship. In John 4:24, Jesus said to Samaritan woman, "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth." Paul emphasized this truth to the Corinthians: "Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, 'Jesus be cursed,' and no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 12:3). And, Paul says, "God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father'" (Gal 4:6). The Holy Spirit teaches his church how to pray, and the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will (Rom 8:26-27; Eph 6:18).

Healthy, growing churches understand and believe that God's Holy Spirit empowers the body of Christ for authentic fellowship (Eph 4:3). Stott emphasizes that members in a healthy church are related to each other in love. They persevere in the fellowship, support each other, and relieve the needs of the poor. "A Spirit-filled church is a loving, caring, sharing church."¹⁷ Through the Spirit, the church is united to Christ in the fellowship of his

¹⁷ Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 87.

sufferings and of his glory. The presence off the Spirit is therefore both promise and realization (1 Cor 1:22; Eph 1:14), for in the spirit of glory we now begin to taste the goodness of the Lord. According to 1 Corinthians 12:3, the church is therefore the people of God and the assembly of Christ because it is the fellowship of the Spirit. Edmund P. Clowney argues that the Spirit fulfills; he does not obliterate membership in God's people or discipleship in following Christ.¹⁸

Healthy, growing churches understand and believe that God's Holy Spirit empowers the body of Christ for God's ministry. According to the New Testament perspective, every born-again believer is called by God to minister and serve. And that this will happen, God's Spirit empowers each believer with different gifts for ministry. No substitute can replace the work of God's Spirit in the church's service (1 Cor 12:4-11).

Healthy, growing churches understand and believe that God's Holy Spirit empowers the body of Christ for sharing the good news of the gospel. Jesus promised his followers that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came on them, and they would witness in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Discussing the early church's mission work, Stott argues that they were engaged in continuous evangelism. He emphasizes that no self-centered, self-contained church, absorbed in its own parochial affairs, can claim to be filled with the Spirit. The

¹⁸ Clowney, *The Church*, 51.

Holy Spirit is a missionary Spirit, so a Spirit-filled church is a missionary church.¹⁹

Biblical Purposes

Healthy, growing churches have biblical purposes. Nothing was more central to Jesus' understanding of his calling than to do God's will (John 6:38). Speaking about Jesus' earthly aim, Benner says, "Nothing, he knew, could be more important than doing God's will. This was the reason he was on earth."²⁰ Then Benner argues that too often we think of God's call solely in terms of what we do. However, while doing will always be involved, vocation is much more than our occupation.²¹

Healthy, growing churches know that a clear-cut understanding of the church's identity (being) is indispensable for a profound understanding of the church's call (doing). A clear, appropriate understanding of church's identity will ultimately determine the ability of that church to discover and understand God's purposes for it. Being a "doing" church is not sufficient. A multitude of activities does not mean necessarily that a church is doing the right thing. Throughout church history, growing churches are those that discerned and understood clearly what God wanted them to do. Therefore, as Rainer writes,

¹⁹ Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 87. Stott argues that there is no need for us to wait, as the 120 had to wait, for the Spirit to come, for the Holy Spirit came on the day of Pentecost and has never left his church. Our responsibility is to humble ourselves before his sovereign authority and determine not to quench him but to allow him his freedom. Then our churches will again manifest the marks of the Spirit's presence that many young people are looking for: biblical teaching, loving fellowship, loving worship, and ongoing, outgoing evangelism.

²⁰ David G. Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 101.

²¹ Ibid.

"the heart of church growth discussion is the purpose of the church."²²

Healthy, growing churches understand that authentic growth depends on God's purposes.

How we can know if a church's purposes are biblical and worthy to follow? There are two main two conditions.

Authentic Purposes Depend on the Church's Identity

Identity creates and determines purposes. Healthy, growing churches are characterized²³ more by godly priorities than by human popularity. Therefore, a healthy, growing church learns how to discern spiritual priorities.

When we discuss the church's purposes, we should admit the complexity and sensibility of this issue. The New Testament does not offer us a prescription and a detailed list of activities that should be implemented in every church through all human history, and there are different theological interpretations of New Testament ecclesiology. But, as we have discussed in chapter 2, by looking at Jesus' teaching, at New Testament metaphors, at the apostolic church, and at the history of church growth, it becomes evident that God has a list of expectations for his church.

As the temple of God, the church is called out for authentic Christian worship. Therefore, worship becomes one of the primary purposes of the church. Worship becomes an act of gratitude and praise in holiness. As the family of God, the church is called out for authentic Christian fellowship.

²² Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth*, 88. Rainer says that typically the functions of the church are categorized into four areas: evangelism, discipleship, worship, and social ministry.

²³ When we say "authentic" we mean biblical, according to God's standards and Word.

Authentic fellowship with God in worship will lead God's people toward an authentic Christian fellowship. Therefore, genuine fellowship is indispensable. As the bride of Christ, the church is called out for sanctification. Therefore, discipleship is not underestimated or limited to providing simple information; it becomes an act of learning, equipping, and growing continuously into Christ-likeness. As the body of Christ, the church is called out for service and ministry. Service is not limited to a small number of ministers; it becomes an act of selflessness and sacrifice for other members of the body. As the people of God, the church is called out for evangelism and mission. Evangelism becomes an act of passion for the lost, a lifestyle.

Christ-centered, Grounded in the Word, Empowered by the Spirit

All authentic purposes or "doing" must be distinguished by these three main characteristics. Also, all other particular activities that are not prescribed in the New Testament must be in harmony with these three characteristics. This approach could be called the harmony principle.

Healthy, growing churches do not conform to the standards of this world but seek to discern God's will (Rom 12:2). And since the church discerns God's will, it will follow that will. As Danny Morris and Charles Olsen say in *Discerning God's Will Together*, "God's will is not a static or fixed stone."²⁴ According to Morris and Olsen, spiritual discernment is not a clever new approach; it is an old approach. It is not an end in itself; it is a lofty

²⁴ Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1997), 52.

means to an end: knowing and doing God's will. If we keep our purpose in sight, we prevail in discernment, and the church will prosper because the church was created to discern and to implement God's will.²⁵ "Spiritual discernment is the church's way to discover God's will and mission in the World."²⁶ And as Carl George says, "When a vision comes from the altar of God, it transforms people who are in the presence of that vision."²⁷ There nothing is more central to church than to understand and follow God's call.

Worship in a Growing Church Is an Act of Gratitude and Praise

According to our research, authentic worship is distinguished by being Christ-centered, Word-grounded, and Spirit-empowered. And such worship is not approached in a human manner; it rather becomes an act of gratitude and praise with reverence. Authentic worship is distinguished by several marks.

Worship Is a Priority

Worship is the supreme and only indispensable activity of the Christian church. It alone will endure, like the love for God that it expresses, into heaven, when all other activities of the church will have passed away.²⁸ "How we worship both reveals and forms our identity as persons and

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 53.

²⁷ Carl F. George, *How to Break Growth Barriers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993), 44. George describes cause-and-effect insights into the reasons why churches grow and why they plateau.

²⁸ Cited by David Peterson, *Engaging with God* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 15.

communities”²⁹ As Webber writes, “The church is first worshiping community.”³⁰ All other church activities will flow from worship and conclude in worship.

Worship Is Trinitarian

The most compelling fact for church worship is that Christ-centered worship is the foundational principle of authentic worship. Worship proclaims Christ and his work, words, and character. In fact, authentic worship is not unitarian but trinitarian. And as Torrance explains, trinitarian worship is viewed as a “gift of participating through the Spirit in the incarnate Son’s communion with the Father.”³¹ A trinitarian worship perspective means, says Torrance, “participating in union with Christ, in what he has done for us once and for all, in his self-offering to Father, in his life and death on the cross. It also means participating in what he is continuing to do for us in the presence of the Father and his mission from the Father to the world.”³² “There is only one Priest through whom and with whom we draw near to God our Father. There is only one Mediator between God and humanity. There is only one offering which is truly acceptable to God, and it is not ours. It is the offering by which he has sanctified for all time those who came to God by Him (Heb 2:11;

²⁹ Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 4.

³⁰ Robert E. Webber, *Worship Is a Verb* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 7

³¹ James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community, and The Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 21.

³² Ibid.

10; 14). There is only one who can lead us into the presence of the Father by his sacrifice on the cross.”³³

Worship is a celebration, but as Webber emphasizes, “it is the celebration of the event of Christ—his death and resurrection. To celebrate Christ, not my devotion to him, frees me from having to create or invent my worship.”³⁴ According to such a perspective, authentic worship is not about us but about god. It is not our worship but his worship. David Peterson concludes his book by saying that Christians of every tradition must come to grips with the New Testament perspective that acceptable worship is an engagement with God, through Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit—a Christ-centered, gospel-serving, life-orientation.³⁵

Worship Is an Act of Praise with Reverence

According to the Old and New Testaments, God always has high expectations of his worshipers. Those expectations apply to both the quality and the atmosphere of worship (Heb 12:28-29; 1 Cor 14:32). And White writes that one of the first marks of growing churches is a commitment to excellence and an attitude that strives for quality and rejects mediocrity.³⁶ Rainer notices that growing churches have enthusiastic and celebrative worship services. They have learned that the true meaning of enthusiasm is *en Theos* (in God). A positive spirit and a sense of expectancy enhance the

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Webber, *Worship Is a Verb*, 9.

³⁵ Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 293.

³⁶ James Emery White, *Opening the Front Door* (Nashville: Convention, 1992), 55.

atmosphere of growing churches. These churches are joyful; smiles are obvious on the faces of the congregation and choir. The focus is on the possibilities through Christ (Phil 4:13). The positive is accentuated because the people believe that God can transform lives. They enter every service with a feeling that God is doing something in their midst.³⁷

In the midst of celebration, it is easy to forget how awesome God is. Without reverence, however, celebration degenerates into shallow triviality.³⁸ And authentic worship will help worshipers to know God more deeply. But, as Benner says, “knowing God also requires surrender. To surrender to Divine love is to find our soul’s home—the place and identity for which we yearn in every cell of being.”³⁹ Today, the tendency is to attempt the dramatic and showy. The temptation is to get caught up in marketing and publicizing the church and to forget the more fundamental call of God to ordinary service and quiet holiness.

Worship Is an Active Experience

In worship, we began to experience God’s presence in an authentic way. As Webber emphasizes, God who spoke, speaks, and God who acted, acts. Therefore, we respond to God, and one of our responses is prayer.⁴⁰ Also, authentic worship calls upon worshipers to respond to others. Webber

³⁷ Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth*, 230.

³⁸ Gary Thomas, *Sacred Pathways* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI: 1996), 165.

³⁹ Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself*, 34. The author emphasizes that genuine knowing demands a response. To know God demands that we be willing to be touched by divine love. To be touched by God’s love is to be forever changed.

⁴⁰ Webber, *Worship Is a Verb*, 9. He also argues that in worship we respond to God in prayer.

says, “If in worship we realize the reconciliation we have with the Father, surely this compels us to be reconciled with each other.”⁴¹ In authentic worship, people are not spectators, looking for somebody else to perform worship, but, as Webber says, “active worship grows out of our response to divine action, breaks through the barriers of passive worship and returns worship to the people.”⁴² Healthy, growing churches understand that Christian joy and reverence cannot be separated in worship.

Worship Is a Source of Spiritual Renewal and Transformation

As David Benner and Lawrence Crabb write in *Sacred Companions*, “The essence of Christian spirituality is following Christ on a journey of personal transformation. The distant land is new creature into which Christ wishes to fashion us—the whole and holy person that finds his or her uniqueness, identity and calling in Christ.”⁴³ Or, as Webber says, “worship is a source of renewal.”⁴⁴ He continues, “In worship God is speaking and acting, bringing to me the benefits of redemption. Through worship, God works on my behalf. He repairs and renews my relationship with him. Consequently, worship for me is no longer something I do because of social or peer pressure. It’s not a requirement that I endure for legalistic reasons, or a painful process in which my sensitivities are offended. Rather, worship is an

⁴¹ Ibid., 10.

⁴² Ibid., 17.

⁴³ Benner and Crabb, *Sacred Companions*, 26.

⁴⁴ Webber, *Worship Is a Verb*, 8.

experience I long to have, a necessary part of my spiritual diet, a central source of my spiritual formation.”⁴⁵

In authentic worship, the sermon does not inform but transforms. According to Michael Horton, “Preaching is not merely the minister’s talk about God but God’s talk—and not just any talk. It’s the kind of talk that produces a new people.” Therefore, “preaching is necessary not because it’s a magic but because God has ordained it for the justification and sanctification of sinners.”⁴⁶ Crabb also argues that passion for worship needs an opportunity for release. The Christian longs for a chance to worship. But frenetic efforts to stir passion produce only a shallow counterfeit. We must learn to structure the opportunity to worship, to re-create the event that stirs our hearts, and then get out of the way and let the Spirit to do work of drawing us to Christ.⁴⁷ Authentic worship transforms people’s hearts because, as Willard says, “the greatest need you and I have—the greatest need of collective humanity—is renovation of our heart. That spiritual place within us from which outlook, choices, and actions come has been formed by a world away from God. Now it must be transformed.”⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Michael Horton, *A Better Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 38-39.

⁴⁷ Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth*, 112.

⁴⁸ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 14. Willard speaks about renovation of the heart as a life process transformation. Transformation, he argues, is not a formula but a systematic process that we have the responsibility to undertake as intentional apprentices of Jesus. Only then will our transformation be accomplished, through interaction with the grace of God in Christ, the presence of the Holy Spirit, and spiritual treasures stored in the body of Christ.

Worship Is an Act of Witness

While worship is the response of believers who give glory and worth to God, biblical testimony indicates that nonbelievers are often in worship services as well. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul instructed church members to conduct their worship services in such manner that the nonbelievers would observe God's presence among that community of worship. It is obvious that Paul believed that common worship had a dual purpose (1 Cor 14:23-24). In other words, as Rainer says, we notice that common worship became the entry point for the unchurched into churches.⁴⁹ James White also comments that the "front door" of the church is no longer a small-group network, such as Sunday school, but the worship service.⁵⁰ In a survey, nonbelievers were asked why they do not attend church. Their answers revealed that common worship can be an obstacle to coming to church:

- churches are always asking for money
- church services are boring and lifeless
- church services are predictable and repetitive
- sermons are irrelevant to daily life as it is lived in the real world

⁴⁹ Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth*, 225. Rainer also presents some reasons why so many non-Christians would prefer to attend, in the beginning, common worship rather than a small group. Most people who are interested in a church would like to try it out with anonymity. It is easier to get lost in a crowd than in a small group. Second, in a crowd, the seeker is not put on the spot to participate. And finally, no commitment is required in a larger group. By visiting the worship service first, people can evaluate the church without being pressured.

⁵⁰ White, *Opening the Front Door*, 16.

- the pastor makes me feel guilty and ignorant, and I leave church
feeling worse than when I entered the doors.⁵¹

However, another danger in planning for relevant common worship is that services could cease to be authentic Christian worship. And as Rainer noted, if everything is geared toward unbelievers, believers will have no opportunity to worship the living God.⁵² The culturally relevant approach toward common worship might become a danger also because such cultural adoption or contextualization can lead to theological compromise. A healthy, growing church knows that the message can never change, for it is about the unchangeable Christ (Heb 13:8).

Worship Is a Lifestyle

For a growing church, worship does not stop with the Sunday morning common worship service. That atmosphere is taken from the church building, and each worshiper becomes a living temple of God (1 Cor 3:16-17). As Henri Nouwen observed, “Celebrating becomes ministry when the celebrant moves beyond the limits of protective rituals to an obedient acceptance of life as a gift.”⁵³ Thus, in a growing church, worship is not just an inspiring experience; it becomes a style of life.

⁵¹ Ibid., 19-20.

⁵² Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth*, 236.

⁵³ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Creative Ministry* (New York: Doubleday, 1978), 114.

Fellowship Is an Act of Unity and Mutual Love

In a real community people know each other, they relate in ways only God's spirit makes possible.

—Lawrence J. Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth*

According to our research, authentic fellowship is a key factor for church growth. Authentic fellowship must be distinguished by being Christ-centered, Word-grounded, and Spirit-empowered. Such a fellowship eliminates human individualism and becomes an act of unity and mutual love. An authentic fellowship is distinguished by several marks.

Fellowship Is a Trinitarian Experience

Stott argues that Christian fellowship is a trinitarian experience; “it is our common share in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but secondly *koinonia* also expresses what we share together, what we give as well what we receive.”⁵⁴ Authentic fellowship is the expression of our relationship with God and one another. It is obvious that these relationships determine every aspect of churches’ being and doing. Therefore, true fellowship is indispensable for healthy church growth. According to Kennon Callahan, “Individuality is discovered in community. We know who we are in relation to the community in which we have found home. And we must point beyond an understanding of the community that is simply a collection of individuals. There is something wholistic and covenantal about who we are as a body that is more than simply

⁵⁴ Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 83.

the sum of the parts.”⁵⁵ Crabb writes that spiritual togetherness in Christ encourages movement toward Christ.⁵⁶ Authentic church fellowship presupposes that every Christian will grow in Christ-likeness and implicitly in fellowship with him.

When every church member comes closer to Jesus, then this relationship will affect directly the relationships among church members. Benner argues that during this process, “we should never be tempted to think that growth in Christ-likeness reduces our uniqueness. Paradoxically, as we become more and more like Christ we become more uniquely our own true self.”⁵⁷ True fellowship is empowered by the Holy Spirit. As Crabb says, the church is a community of people on a journey to God. Wherever there is supernatural togetherness and Spirit-directed movement, there is the church—spiritual community.⁵⁸ We should recognize that only the Spirit of God makes possible our journey toward unity with God and one another. When each church member keeps intimacy with God at the forefront, the result will be healthy fellowship inside the church. Macchia notes that the body of Christ is indeed a team, interwoven with perfection, just as God ordained from the dawn of creation. The parts of the body need each other to

⁵⁵ Kennon L. Callahan, *Effective Church Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), 112.

⁵⁶ Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth*, 22.

⁵⁷ Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself*, 16. The author emphasizes that while some Christians’ visions of the spiritual life imply that as we become more like Christ, we look more and more like each other, such a cultic expectation of loss of individuality has nothing in common with genuine Christian spirituality.

⁵⁸ Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth*, 21.

be a living organism, alive in the Spirit, serving side by side, enhancing one another's role, giving of one's self so that the other can thrive.⁵⁹

Fellowship Is Expressed Through Authentic Unity

"The biblical test of true community is very practical. The body is a unit; though it is made of many parts, it functions as one body. The body is complete and healthy when each part functions optimally, in harmony with the other parts. The mark of authentic community is full participation of its members in the ministry of the community. Oneness cannot happen when parts of the body are paralyzed into inaction by ugly discriminations. The atrophy or impairment of one part of the body can cripple the whole body"⁶⁰ (1 Cor 12:26). Unity is the presence of genuine harmony, understanding, and goodwill between people.⁶¹ God calls us to do all we can to "live at peace with everyone" (Rom 12:18).

According to the New Testament, unity is a key factor for an authentic church's fellowship and witness. Authentic fellowship cannot be directly obtained through our efforts; it is a gift that God gives to those who believe in his Son, Jesus, and obey his commands (1 John 3:21-24). Therefore, if we want to experience authentic church fellowship, we must be reconciled to God by trusting and seeking harmonious fellowship with those around us. Unity does not exclude diversity; authentic diversity leads to selflessness and mutual Christian love.

⁵⁹ Steven A. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Team* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 33.

⁶⁰ Gilbert Bilezikian, *Community 101* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 128.

⁶¹ Ken Sande, *Peace Maker* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 46.

Fellowship Is an Evangelistic Witnessing Act

According to Jesus' teaching, the unity of the church is a powerful evangelistic tool. The survey of pastors in Moldova also proved that the unity among the body is a significant element in growing churches. Speaking about unity, Ken Sande argues that unity is an essential element of our Christian witness, because when peace and unity characterize our relationship with other people, we show that we are God's children and he is present and working in our lives.⁶²

Fellowship Is an Act of Love and Care

Jesus told his disciples, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). And as Crabb notes, a central task of a community is to create a place that is safe enough for the walls to be torn down, safe enough for each of us to own and reveal our brokenness. Only then can community be used of God to restore our souls.⁶³ Crabb says, "It's time to build the church, a community of people who take refuge in God and encourage each other to never flee to another source of help, a community of folks who know the only way to live in this world is to focus on the spiritual life—our life with God and others. It won't be easy, but it will be worth it. Our impact on the world is at stake."⁶⁴ Nouwen argues that individual care becomes ministry when one who wants to be of help moves beyond the careful balance of give and take with a willingness to risk his own life and

⁶² Ibid., 47.

⁶³ Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth*, 11.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 20.

remain faithful to his suffering fellow man even when his own name and fame are in danger.⁶⁵

Fellowship Is Protected by Overcoming Conflicts

The New Testament is clear that unity is a powerful signs of a healthy, growing church. Therefore, peace and unity are not optional activities for believers.⁶⁶ As God's children, reconciled to God through Christ, we are called to respond to any conflict in a way that is remarkably different from the way the world deals with conflict (Matt 5:9). And as Sande emphasizes, conflicts provide opportunities to glorify God, serve other people, and grow to be like Christ.⁶⁷ Growing churches know that unresolved conflict hinders the church's growth. As well, growing churches know how to glorify God through a wise and a godly manner of solving conflicts. Healthy, growing churches love God and love others.

Discipleship Is an Act of Spiritual Transformation

In growing churches, discipleship is growing into Christ-likeness through the Word of God. According to our research, discipleship is a key factor for healthy church growth. During the survey, 80% of interviewed pastors mentioned that authentic teaching and preaching of the Word is a key factor for church growth.

⁶⁵ Nouwen, *Creative Ministry*, 114.

⁶⁶ Sande, *Peace Maker*, 56. Sande also argues that peacemaking is not an optional activity for believers, and since we have committed our lives to Christ, he invites us to draw on his grace and commands us to seek peace with others.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 259 (see Rom 8:28-29; 1 Cor 10:31—11:1; Jas 1:2-4).

Discipleship Is a Divine Command

Healthy, growing churches are called to make disciples.⁶⁸ In the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-19), Jesus was not making a suggestion to his followers. Rather, he set out a command and a divine principle for his church. Therefore, growing churches understand that discipleship is indispensable to the church's being and doing. Many churches are strong in going and in bringing people inside of the church building, but they may fall short in making disciples.

However, healthy church growth occurs when the church understands that one of its main tasks is to teach Christ's followers all the truth. If a church neglects discipleship, then the church neglects its own healthy growth. And this inadequate attitude toward the importance of discipleship leads to many problems. On many occasions, this attitude causes spiritual stagnation in members' lives. Others may give up biblical principles. Still others may be attracted by false doctrines and movements, and yet others may leave the church and go back to their old style of life.

Discipleship's Ultimate Goal Is Spiritual Formation

Healthy, growing churches are called to obey all of God's Word. In these churches, discipleship does not only inform. In a healthy, growing church, knowledge about God becomes knowing God. Such an experience transforms believers into Christ-likeness. Authentic discipleship is characterized by willingness to grow in Christ-likeness. And this formational

⁶⁸ The word *disciple* appears 269 times in the New Testament.

process is not limited to ministers or leaders; it is for every believer. Disciples follow Christ, depend on him, and live like him (1 John 2:6). And when every believer grows and becomes more like Christ, no one can hinder that church from growing and advancing.

Authentic discipleship is a transformational life process. Therefore, in a growing church, discipleship is not reduced to a program that informs but is an act that forms and helps people grow spiritually. Nouwen writes, “If we say that preaching is means announcing the good news, it is important to realize that for most people there is absolutely no news in the sermon.”⁶⁹ In Nouwen’s opinion, there are two main reasons why a preacher often creates more antagonism than sympathy: the assumption of nonexistent feelings and the preoccupation with a theological point of view.⁷⁰

Commenting on Matthew 28:18-19, Willard says that here we find God’s plan for the growth and preparing of local congregations as well as of the church at large. And in his plan of church’ spiritual formation God has three stages: making disciples (that is, apprentices of Jesus); immersing the apprentices at all levels of growth in the trinitarian presence; and transforming disciples inwardly, in such a way that doing the words and deeds of Christ are not the focus but the natural outcome or side effect.⁷¹ Disciples of Christ are those who are with him learning to be like Christ.⁷²

⁶⁹ Nouwen, *Creative Ministry*, 26.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 29.

⁷¹ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 240. He author argues that this is what “teaching them to do everything I have commanded you” amounts to.

⁷² Ibid., 241 (see Eph 4:12-13; 2 Tim 3:16).

Discipleship Is Based Only on the Word of God

Healthy, growing churches are called to teach everything Jesus commanded in His Word. Jesus spent three years with his disciples to teach and equip them for the ministry, and then he sent them with a clear prescription of what they must teach. That prescription was the Word of God. In healthy, growing churches, believers have various opportunities to study the Word and to teach it. Growing churches faithfully preach and teach God's Word. There is no substitute for it; according to the New Testament, God's Word is eternal.

There are different opinions about the style of biblical preaching or the style of Bible study. Many authors consider expository preaching to be the most biblical style. Others favor inductive Bible study. But our research indicated that style by itself does determine church growth. For a church to grow, the authority and centrality of the Bible cannot be compromised. And when the Word is empowered by the Holy Spirit, it changes, transforms, and helps believers grow into Christ-likeness. In *Creative Ministry*, Nouwen emphasizes that preaching belongs to the heart of the Christian ministry.⁷³ He argues that teaching becomes ministry when the teacher moves beyond the transference of knowledge and is willing to offer his life experience to his student so that paralyzed anxiety can be removed, new liberating insight can come about, and real learning can take place. Preaching becomes ministry when the preacher moves beyond the "telling of the story" and makes his

⁷³ Nouwen, *Creative Ministry*, 25.

deepest self available to his hearers so that they will be able to receive the Word of God.⁷⁴

Discipleship Leads into Service

In healthy, growing churches, disciples are called to serve and minister. In other words, discipleship is not reduced to an academic exercise in which everyone's ultimate goal is to become a leader of class. Learning the Word and teaching are indispensable to being a disciple of Christ, but if that knowledge does not motivate the person to serve God and others, it is not sufficient.

Discipleship Is a Lifestyle

Healthy, growing churches are called to discipleship as a style of live. We are not disciples only because we are called Christians or attend Sunday worship services in a church. According to Jesus' teaching, discipleship cannot be reduced to attendance at a one-hour Sunday worship service or Sunday school class. Authentic discipleship is daily obedience to God's Word. Today, the tendency is to reduce church members to consumers.

However, being Christ's follower does not mean only being baptized and attending church. It continues beyond Sundays (see Gal 2:20). Discipleship is not just doing; it is the being of a church. In other words, authentic discipleship is about growing closer to Jesus, becoming more like him, living like him.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 114.

Service Is an Act of Selflessness and Sacrifice

According to our research, a selfless attitude toward the ministry is a key factor for healthy church growth. During the survey, 90% of the pastors mentioned that passivity and church members' indifference toward the ministry are the greatest obstacles to healthy church growth. Consequently, according to this finding, we can say that an authentic attitude toward ministry is a key factor for healthy church growth.

Church Leaders Are Examples in Service

In healthy, growing churches, pastors and leaders are examples of selfless ministry. Dedication of the entire community begins with the pastors' example. On a special occasion, Jesus said to his disciples, "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13:14-15). C. Peter Wagner emphasized that in the United States, the primary catalyst for growth in a local church is the pastor.⁷⁵ In every dynamic church he has studied, he found that there was a key person whom God was using to cause church growth.⁷⁶ In our research, it was discovered that a dedicated, mature pastor⁷⁷ is a significant factor in church's growth.

⁷⁵ C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1981), 55. Wagner also said that the pastor of a growing church is typically a strong authority figure and that authority has been earned through a living relationship with the people.

⁷⁶ C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, rev. ed. (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1984), 60.

⁷⁷ Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow* (1981), 30-32. Wagner describes the qualities of a leader in a growing church. (1) Single-minded obedience. Church growth leaders take the lordship of Jesus Christ seriously. They have counted, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer would say, "the cost of

George emphasizes that when we consider the idea that a Christian is specially gifted by the Holy Spirit for one-another ministries (1 Cor 12:1-12. 14:12, 26), then a new paradigm can be born.⁷⁸ As Paul Borthwick said, “God’s purpose is to exalt Himself, not us, and an effective leader is dedicated first to exalting Christ in his or her own life.”⁷⁹

People Are Equipped for Serving

In healthy, growing churches, every member is called to serve and minister. These churches create appropriate ways for every member to become an instrument for noble purposes, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work (2 Tim 2:21). Service from an unclean heart will not be accepted by the Lord. Effective spiritual ministry flows out of being, and God is concerned with our being.⁸⁰ Therefore, one of the greatest challenges for Christian leaders is to develop godly character.⁸¹ “Character is foundational if a leader is to influence people for God’s purposes.”⁸² Therefore, the task of leadership is, as Robert Clinton emphasizes, “influencing God’s people

discipleship.” They are willing to pay the price for doing whatever is necessary to obey and fulfill God’s Great Commission (Matt 28:19-20). (2) Clearly defined objectives. Church growth leaders are motivated by the assurance that they have understood the revealed will of God. (3) Reliance on discerning research. Church growth leaders are well aware of what must have been behind the words of Proverbs 18:13. (4) Ruthlessness in evaluating results. Church growth leaders have often been criticized as being too pragmatic. They are pragmatic, but they would like to consider it as consecrated pragmatism. A strategy must be substituted that will produce the results that God desires. (5) An attitude of optimism and faith. Church growth leaders are convinced that Christ is building his church as he said he would (see Matt 16:18), and they are confident that the gates of hell will not prevail it. They pray for conversions in large numbers. They expect God to bring about people movements to Christ. They believe that this is a pleasing to God because it is a product of faith.

⁷⁸ George, *How to Break Growth Barriers*, 185.

⁷⁹ Paul Borthwick, *Leading the Way* (Waynesboro, GA: Gabriel Publishing, 1989), 217.

⁸⁰ Robert Clinton, *The Making of a Leader* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1988), 13.

⁸¹ Ibid., 57.

⁸² Ibid., 74. According to Clinton, integrity is the true measure of the inner life. Character development comes before ministry (78).

toward God's purposes.⁸³ According to him, "each leader personally must be what God wants him or her to be. Each leader must be involved in raising up other leaders. And each leader must be in tune with God's purposes for them."⁸⁴ Therefore, as leaders we must offer ourselves to Jesus Christ as living sacrifices (Rom 12:1), and then we will be able to understand and follows God's will and purposes. Nouwen argues that the minister who cares for people is called to be skillful but not a handyman, knowledgeable but not an imposter, a professional but not a manipulator. When he is able to deny himself, to be faithful, and to understand the meaning of human suffering, then the man who is cared for will discover that through the hands of those who want to be of help God shows tender love for him. And Jesus can be called pastor in this sense. If a minister wants to be a real help in his contact with people, he has to be a professional with special information, special training, and special skills. But if he wants to break through the chains of our manipulative world, he has to move beyond professionalism and, through self-denial and contemplation, become a faithful witness of God's covenant.⁸⁵

A main responsibility of church leaders is to equip God's people to do ministry (Eph 4:11-13). As Gilbert Bilezikian writes, "The biblical job description of church leaders is not to take it upon themselves to do the ministry of the church but to encourage the congregation to do it by training

⁸³ Ibid., 203. Clinton notes that leaders must develop a ministry philosophy that simultaneously honors biblical values, embraces the challenges of the times in which they live, and fits their unique gifts and personal development if they expect to be productive over a lifetime.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 204.

⁸⁵ Nouwen, *Creative Ministry*, 64-65.

'God's people for works service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.'

Church leaders must mobilize all the human and spiritual resources available in their community.⁸⁶ And, he argues, "the biblical prescribed mechanism to equip the body for ministry is the discovery and the utilization of spiritual gifts."⁸⁷ At first view, this seems simple to accomplish, but most church leaders probably would recognize that this is one of the most difficult ministry challenges. However, equipping the saints and involving them in the ministry is a must. Equipping the saints involves helping every church member to develop skills for ministry. Jesus was the Master at equipping people for ministry. He chose twelve men and spent three years with them in order to equip them. As church leaders, we need to follow his example. Church leaders must leave the comfort zone and model sacrificial discipleship.

Service Is Empowered by the Holy Spirit

A growing church's ministry is always empowered by God's Holy Spirit. The Bible teaches explicitly that God's power is most evident in us when we acknowledge our weaknesses and look for his grace and strength (see 2 Cor 12:9-10). Commenting these verses, McIntosh and Rima write that Paul sees the acknowledgment of his weakness as a prerequisite for experiencing the power of God in his life and ministry. It seems safe to say that if the great

⁸⁶ Bilezikian, *Community 101*, 145. Bilezikian comments that the highest attainment achievable by leaders is to reproduce their expertise in "ordinary" people and turn them into leaders. In his opinion, this is also the best expression of servanthood: leaders who train others to excel beyond them.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

apostle thought that acknowledging his weakness was necessary for receiving God's power, it is essential for us as well.⁸⁸

Service Is for Every Church Member

Growing churches are churches that serve together. God's ministry was not designated just for a ministry team. And healthy, growing churches understand that authentic ministry can be accomplished only when every part does its work. According to the New Testament perspective, the ministers of the local church are all of its members (Eph 4:16). Scripture challenges all members to be involved in God's work. Jesus brought us into his body and gave us gifts for ministry and service in the church. Service cannot be done in an individualistic way. Therefore, in growing churches leaders and church members know, as Stephen Macchia says, "that they are to work cooperatively not competitively."⁸⁹ Macchia characterizes healthy teams in this way: "The godly team of the twenty-first century cares deeply about the claims of Christ being fulfilled in their ministry environment and in the context of their specific team. The Christ-honoring team embraces the challenge of living in community together and seeking ways to complement and empower others to be the best that God called them to be."⁹⁰ According to Bilezikian, in the community of servants, ministry is not leader-centered but congregation-based. The congregation is not there to support leaders to do ministry. It is

⁸⁸ McIntosh and Rima, *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership*, 157.

⁸⁹ Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Team*, 22.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 23. Macchia concludes that a healthy team freely, lovingly, and generously cheers others on to victory against the real enemy of our souls, not against other Christians, churches, ministries, or endeavors that are also seeking to build up the kingdom of God.

the other way around: the leaders are there to support the congregation's ministry.⁹¹

Evangelism Is an Act of Passion for the Lost

According to our research, evangelism is a significant factor in church growth. During the survey, 88% of the interviewed pastors said that every church member's involvement in sharing the gospel brings growth in the church.

Evangelism Is Not an Optional Act

Healthy, growing churches understand that evangelism is a divine command. The New Testament abounds in arguments that demonstrate the urgency and the necessity of "going" and "proclaiming" the gospel (see Mark 16:15-16). Consequently, one of the church's top priorities is to go out and preach the Good News. Willard emphasizes that outreach is an essential task of Christ's people.⁹²

A Pure Life Is an Evangelistic Tool

Healthy churches understand that a good testimony by believers is a powerful evangelistic tool. Our research revealed that 80% of interviewed pastors agreed that a bad Christian testimony is an obstacle to church growth. The apostle Peter wrote, "Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and

⁹¹ Bilezikian, *Community 101*, 146.

⁹² Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 244.

strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” (1 Pet 2:11-12). For a growing church, there is no more powerful element for authentic evangelism than Christians’ pure lives that glorify God. Such testimonies are a powerful evangelistic method. A growing church is a living witness of God’s grace, not a social or charitable organization. Although the church does engage in social and charitable programs, it does so as a vehicle through which to share the good news of Christ with others. Healthy, growing churches are marked by compassion and love toward lost and unsaved people. The church must go into the world to save those in the world (John 17:6-19).

Evangelism Is a Lifestyle

Healthy churches understand that evangelism is not only for evangelists or pastors; it is the lifestyle of every believer. Bilezikian said, “When modern Christians act more like Jesus, who was a friend of sinners, and less like the Pharisees, who took pride in their righteous separation from sinners, they can share their witness in congenital settings instead of influencing it where is not wanted. The right to witness must be earned.”⁹³ Willard argues that the most successful work of outreach is the work of

⁹³ Bilezikian, *Community 101*, 147.

inreach that turns people, wherever they are, into lights in the darkened world.⁹⁴ This approach becomes a powerful vehicle of healthy growth.

Crabb comments that a local church needs many things, but it will properly prioritize its needs only when it gets its purpose straight. Its purpose is to draw people to Christ, to mirror Christ to one another, and to show Christ to others by the way we live. Crabb emphasizes that this happens only in a community of people on a journey to God, only in a group of people who turn their chairs toward each other.⁹⁵ The early church's evangelism was not an occasional or sporadic activity.⁹⁶

Evangelism Includes Church Planting

Healthy churches understand that the gospel needs to be shared not only in their area but in other areas, too. They are willing to pray and send people and support. Probably some people would ask, "Does church planting positively affect the growth of the church?" The answer is an unqualified yes. Rainer argues that total church growth, which is closely related to kingdom growth, is enhanced. New churches have both a higher growth rate and a higher conversion growth rate.⁹⁷ The early church was always preoccupied with sharing the gospel in other parts of the Roman Empire. When persecution broke out, Christians scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. They shared their faith and started churches as they fled (Acts 8:1-4).

⁹⁴ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 244.

⁹⁵ Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth*, 183.

⁹⁶ Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 86-87.

⁹⁷ Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth*, 206.

An examination of the rapid growth of the early church makes it obvious that church planting is essential. The work of church planting began with Paul and Barnabas, who followed the leading of the Holy Spirit to go and preach the gospel in multiple locations (Acts 13:2-3). “Christ’s church today needs more leaders as followers who are willing to leave the comfort of their local churches to do something great for God. God is calling established churches to be good stewards of what He has given. Remember the essence of the Great Commission is not ‘come to my church.’ It is ‘therefore go!’”⁹⁸ Church planting is beneficial not only for overall kingdom growth but also for the local church that is visionary enough to plant and start new churches. As Rainer says, “A sponsoring church may send members and money to a new church and the sponsoring church inevitably sees God honor that commitment. This is a basic understanding of stewardship: God blesses what we give. Excitement is evident when new churches are started, and that excitement attracts new members to the sponsoring church.”⁹⁹

Evangelism Is an Act of Passion, Not Obligation

In a healthy, growing church, evangelism is done with passion¹⁰⁰ and love. And as Borthwick notes, passionate people pay the price, absorb the cost, and go after purposes with sold-out zeal.¹⁰¹ Motivation for witness,

⁹⁸ Ibid., 213.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 207.

¹⁰⁰ Paul Borthwick, *Stop Witnessing and Start Loving* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2003), 18. Borthwick defines passion as something we are so intensely committed to that we would be willing to suffer or die for it.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 19.

evangelism, and all other forms of outreach must flow from our love to Christ. And then out of that love will flow our love for lost and unsaved people. And when a church is filled with the love of Christ, then that church touches the lives of many other people. It becomes a light that cannot be hidden.

Evangelism Will Add More Believers

Healthy, growing churches understand that church growth does not mean only qualitative growth. It means as well quantitative growth. Healthy churches understand that quantity is a biblical issue. And our research shows that healthy church growth involves growing into Christ-likeness and growing in numbers. Stott says that we can learn three vital lessons about local evangelism. First, the Lord added to their number. Second, Jesus added those who were being saved. He did not add them to the church without saving them, nor did he save them without adding them to the church. Salvation and church membership belonged together; they still do. Third, the Lord added people daily. The verb is an imperfect (kept adding).¹⁰² Healthy, growing churches want to grow and have right motives for church growth: they want to grow because they love God and love sinners. They want to grow because they are called to be salt and light to the world and glorify God through being obedient to and doing his will.

¹⁰² Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 86-87. Stott comments that the early Christians did not organize quinquennial or decennial missions. Worship was daily, as was their witness. Praise and proclamation were the natural overflow of hearts full of the Holy Spirit. And as their outreach was continuous, so converts were being added. We need to recover this expectation of steady and uninterrupted church growth.

Church Growth Is Not Optional

No Excuses for Lack of Growth

There are tendencies to excuse the lack of church growth by pointing to external factors. For instance, some would say that church growth happens only in growing areas. Others would try to excuse lack of growth by saying that church growth happens only in new or recently planted churches. Others are tempted to think that growth occurs only in large churches. Others argue that contemporary music or worship style will bring more people.

Healthy Growth Depends on God

Church growth is not just a simple human desire. Its origin begins and ends in our triune God. Many authors argue that one of the first factors for church growth is that the pastor and church want that church to grow. However, as members of God's church, by his divine nature and call we are intended to grow and advance. Jesus said to Peter and the other disciples, "I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matt 16:18). Later, the apostle Peter reminded readers, God's "divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires" (2 Pet 1:3-4).

Human Efforts Required

After Peter explained what God does, he challenged his addressees, "For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For, if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." (2 Pet 1:5-8). The apostle Paul explains to the Corinthians that he planted the seed and Apollos watered it, but God made that church grow (1 Cor 3:6). Luke emphasized the same principle by writing about the apostolic church, "They . . . were praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:46-47). In all these instances, church growth is brought about first by the divine factor and then by the human factor. In other words, as a result of our godly attitude toward God's call, he will add people to his kingdom.

The Indispensability of Prayer

A House of Prayer

Prayer is the power behind the principles. There is no more important principle in church growth than prayer. The prayer of the early church unleashed the power of God to add thousands to the church.¹⁰³ Jesus

¹⁰³ Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth*, 184.

emphasized that his house will be called a house of prayer for all nations (Mark 11:17). Healthy, growing churches emphasize the priority and the necessity of prayer, both private and common. Jesus was a man of prayer, and he prayed while he was on earth. And if the Son of God needed to pray, how much more does his church need to pray (see Acts 1:42; Eph 6:18; 1 Thess 5:17; 1 Tim 2:8).

Growing Churches Are Led by People of Prayer

A prayer ministry will be effective only when the pastor and other church leaders devote themselves to prayer. A recent study has shown that the average American pastor spends from fifteen to twenty-two minutes daily in prayer. One of four pastors spends less than ten minutes daily in prayer.¹⁰⁴ For healthy church growth, pastors' qualitative and quantitative time with God is a must. A prayer ministry will be effective when pastors teach the people about the biblical priority of prayer. And for a healthy, growing church, prayer becomes the very life source of the church.

Encouraging Common Prayer

David Peterson says that the challenge for many contemporary churches is to give more places to prayer in their public meetings to share the vision the progress of the gospel and the glory of God, and to encourage congregational members to meet for prayer in a range of contexts outside the

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 180.

formal gathering of the church.¹⁰⁵ Common prayer was the source of power for the explosive growth of the early church. Before Pentecost, the first believers “joined together constantly in prayer” (Acts 1:14). A key factor in the continued waves of growth in the early church was the devotion of the believers to prayer¹⁰⁶ (Acts 2:42). Commenting on the prayer of the early church, Stott noted in hard times the church turned to prayer, which is the only power that the powerless possess.¹⁰⁷

Taking Every Decision with Prayer

Common prayer is indispensable for understanding God’s vision and call for the church. Jesus’ ministry was begun with prayer (Luke 6:12). In the early church, “while they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off” (Acts 13:2-3). And when churches pray to God for a clear vision, he will miraculously open their eyes to possibilities. Rainer emphasizes that prayer must be the means by which we see God’s vision for our churches, and it must also be one of the principal weapons in the warfare against those powers that would impede the growth of the church.¹⁰⁸

Healthy, growing churches understand that every decision and election is a key factor for the church’s health and growth. And healthy churches do

¹⁰⁵ Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 158.

¹⁰⁶ Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth*, 175.

¹⁰⁷ John R. W. Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 208-9.

¹⁰⁸ Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth*, 179.

not have a superficial approach toward every decision, including the servants' elections. In healthy churches, prayer is not only a preparation for work or an indispensable condition for effective ministry. Prayer becomes a life. Prayer and church ministry can never be divorced.

Sometime our approach toward prayer is so different from our Lord's. We plan what we want to happen, complete with vision statements and strategic initiatives; then we organize a team to help make it happen. And finally, with our plans in place, we commit them to the Lord. But spiritual and healthy churches start everything with prayer. When Jesus lived on the earth, he prayed first, sometimes all night. Then he gathered a community around himself. Then he sent them out to minister.

CONCLUSION

Healthy churches understand that there are key factors that are essential to church growth. They understand that authentic church growth is more than implementing plans and programs, having well-trained and professional equipped staff, adding numbers, human efforts, and more, even, than prayer. Healthy churches understand that throughout church history, God has worked in various ways. But healthy churches understand that key factors will cross any culture and any context; in other words, these factors are biblical and universal.

Healthy, growing churches are those with a biblical identity that is found in Christ. These churches are preoccupied first with their being and

then with their doing. And churches with authentic biblical identity are distinguished by being Christ-centered, Word-grounded, and Holy Spirit-empowered.

Healthy, growing churches have biblical, authentic purposes. These churches understand that their authentic purposes must be Christ-centered, Word-grounded, and Holy Spirit-empowered. Healthy, growing churches understand that simply doing Christian activities is not sufficient; they understand that the doing of the church must be the activities that God wants them to do. In other words, they understand that authentic growth depends on God's purposes for the church. There nothing is more essential to church growth than to understand and implement God's will in all church's doing.

Healthy, growing churches worship God with gratitude, praise, and reverence. Growing churches understand that worship is an indispensable call of the Christian church. They understand that the church is a worship community, called to worship God in an authentic way, and all other activities will flow from worship and will end in worship.

Healthy, growing churches make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the church through the bond of peace and love. Growing churches understand that Christian fellowship is essential to healthy church growth. In growing churches, fellowship becomes an act of unity and mutual love and an indispensable condition for growth.

Healthy, growing churches make disciples. For growing churches, discipleship is more than an option; it is a divine command. For growing

churches, the ultimate goal of discipleship is not information but spiritual formation into Christ-likeness.

Healthy, growing churches serve with selflessness and sacrifice. In growing churches, leaders are examples of dedication and selflessness in ministry. They equip and encourage all believers to serve God according to their gifts.

Healthy, growing churches share the Good News with passion and love. For growing churches, evangelism is not an option; it is a lifestyle.

Healthy, growing churches understand that church growth is not optional. They know and believe Christ's promise that his church will grow and advance. Therefore, growing churches depend totally on God, but they also make every effort to accomplish what God has called them to do. They understand that church growth is a result of their godly attitude toward God's call, but God makes the church grow.

And finally, healthy, growing churches understand the value and the importance of prayer. Growing churches understand that prayer is indispensable to Christ's church. Growing churches understand that a church is called first to be a house of prayer. Therefore, growing churches are led by people of prayer and encourage common prayer, take every church decision in prayer, and honor God through a prayer life. For growing churches, prayer is beyond all principles.

Chapter 6

GENERALIZATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

There is no greater joy and privilege on this earth than to see God's church growing and his kingdom advancing. And healthy, growing churches are those that understand who they are, where they want to go, and how they intend to get there. The greatest need of the postmodernism church is not a new philosophy or paradigm; it is not new structures or new programs, for all these without Jesus Christ, God's Word, and the Holy Spirit are like a body without any life in it. Today is a time for redefinition. It is time to talk about the church's identity and call. Today, the church desperately needs a renewed biblical understanding of its divine identity and its divine call. The church needs a renewal that will re-establish Jesus Christ, God's Word, and the Holy Spirit's power and guidance at the center of the church's being and doing. And healthy, growing churches will have such a vision. Consequentially, according to our research, it is possible to list seven key principles.

First, church growth is mandated by the church's divine origin, identity, and purposes and because of the great need of the world. As the Christian church enters into the twenty-first century, local churches are experiencing a time with impressive and extraordinary opportunities for God's church to grow and advance. For that reason, healthy, growing churches understand that church growth is not elective or optional for God's church. Healthy, growing churches understand and trust in Christ's promise and assurance that he will

build his church and the gates of the hell will not overcome it. His church will grow and advance.

Second, healthy church growth includes both qualitative and quantitative growth. According to the New Testament, qualitative church growth refers to the spiritual formation of believers into Christ's likeness. And quantitative church growth refers to the number of believers who are being added to the local church. According to the New Testament, healthy churches grow spiritually and numerically. And growing, healthy churches understand that by qualitative and quantitative growth, the kingdom of God grows, and this growth brings glory to the Lord of the church.

Third, healthy church growth is the supreme and divine work of God through faithful people. According to the New Testament, healthy church growth is first a divine, supernatural work of God. But at the same time, healthy church growth involves human effort. In other words, healthy church growth is produced by God when his people are faithful to him. He empowers them, enabling them to participate in the divine process of growing and advancing his church. This principle of partnership between God and people is an indispensable one for healthy church growth. As a result, God's power and his people's faithful effort must be present in healthy churches. A church cannot grow and advance without God, but in his grace God has decided not to do that without his faithful people. Therefore, church growth is not an option for human beings; it is a divine work of the holy Trinity through human beings.

Fourth, a healthy, growing church understands its divine identity. One of the greatest challenges of the local church is to rediscover and then maintain the original identity that was given by the founder, builder, and head of the church, Jesus Christ. Understanding the church's identity is a high imperative from the Lord of the church. Only those churches that live in this world according to their divine identity (being) will experience spiritual and numerical growth. Healthy, growing churches have a clear-cut, biblical identity. And when a church is the church, then nothing can stand against its growth. Therefore, the church's first preoccupation is to understand what it is to be and then what it is to do.

One of the greatest needs for a church to grow is to understand and accept its true identity in Jesus Christ. A church must recognize that its value does not depend on its numbers, performance, position, achievements, buildings, or leaders, but only on Jesus Christ. He is the head of the church, the builder of the church, and the sustainer of the church, and he will come again for his church. As Gary L. McIntosh and Samuel D. Rima Sr. emphasize in *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership*, "Without Christ and God's Grace, our best efforts and most altruistic acts are like filthy rags in God's sight" (Isa 64:6).⁴⁷⁸ And if a local church fails to find its identity in Christ, it fails in finding its authentic value.

⁴⁷⁸ Gary L. McIntosh and Samuel D. Rima Sr., *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), 205. The authors comment that our worth as God's people is what results from our position in Christ rather than our condition on earth. In their opinion, Christian growth takes place as we appropriate what we already are in Christ (our position, identity) by faith and then practice that in our earthly lives.

When a church loses its God's given-identity, it looks for human methods and resources to restore its identity instead of turning back to its original being. Healthy, growing churches understand that God designed his church to be in the world but must be distinct from the world. When churches become like the world, then those churches cease to be what God has intended them to be. And when a church loses its God-given identity, it will stop growing and advancing God's kingdom.

Healthy, growing churches understand that their divine identity must be Christ-centered, Word-grounded, and Holy Spirit-empowered. These churches understand that according to their divine identity, the church is a temple of God, the household of God, the bride of Christ, the body of Christ, and the people of God. All those metaphors emphasize that Christ alone has property rights to the church. The church of Jesus Christ is a divine creation. It finds its source in the eternal counsel of God. Its origin, design, mission, purpose, and destiny are expressions of the love, wisdom, grace, power, and pleasure of God. Therefore, the church cannot be reduced to a human institution or organization. Its identity cannot be built by techniques and methodology alone. Jesus is the one who loved the church. He built and established the church's identity, he is its only foundation, and he is the head of the church because the church is purchased by his blood. And finally, he will present the church to himself as a radiant church, without stain, wrinkle, or blemish, holy and blameless.

Healthy, growing churches know that a better understanding of the biblical characteristics of the church helps to develop a better understanding of the church's goals and mission on earth. God's greatest concern for his church is for what the church is and then what the church does. Therefore, the being of the church must always precede the doing of the church, for what we do will be according to what we are. That is why a biblical understanding of church's nature is a primary prerequisite for understanding God's call for the church.

It is necessary to emphasize that the biblical church's identity is universal. The essence of the church's identity does not change according to context or culture; the church's divine identity is unchangeable. But such an approach does not presuppose that local churches lose their uniqueness. Every local church has its own context and uniqueness. Authentic church identity is not created by human organizations or comities. As David Benner says, "It is simply a creation."⁴⁷⁹ Also, a church's identity is always a discovery. It is revealed by God. And the church's identity is always a gift of God.

Fifth, healthy, growing churches understand their divine purpose. The church's identity determines the church's purpose. Healthy, growing churches understand that an authentic identity determines the ability of the church to understand its divine purposes and the ability to grow and advance for God's glory. They will be precise in understanding their divine reason for doing.

⁴⁷⁹ David G. Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 16.

Healthy, growing churches understand that, as the owner of the church, Jesus has already established the purposes for his church, and those purposes are not negotiable. Churches need to discover, understand, and implement those purposes. It is not their responsibility to create or invent the church's purposes but to understand what Jesus as the founder and the owner of the church has called his church to do. Looking at the church's identity as it is expressed through the images and analogies in the New Testament, healthy churches will understand that each of these images has profound implications for discovering and understanding God's purposes for the local church. But all authentic church purposes are distinguished by three main characteristics: they are Christ-centered, grounded in the Word of God, and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Healthy, growing churches understand that the church as the temple of God is called to worship God. These churches understand that worship is primary purpose of the church. In healthy, growing churches, worship is focused of God. The goal of worship is not performance but rather spiritual formation of the worshiper. In worship, two ingredients are always present: a sense of holiness and a sense of joy. In healthy, growing churches, God takes the central place, and people are confronted with God's holiness and convicted of their sins and their need to be cleansed, saved, and sanctified. When the worshiper is confronted with God's Word and his holiness, there is no option other than life transformation. Therefore, in healthy, growing churches, worship becomes a source for spiritual renewal. Also, worship calls

the worshiper to a commitment. In authentic worship, people are called to dedicate themselves as living, holy sacrifices. Also, worshipers are called to worship God with their spiritual and material gifts. Healthy, growing churches understand that according to the New Testament, worship is not something we do one hour a week but a lifestyle that we offer God.

Healthy, growing churches understand that the church as the household of God is called to fellowship. Healthy, growing churches understand that one of the greatest signs of an authentic church is its unity. And where there is no unity, there is no fellowship, and as a result there is no authentic church growth. Healthy, growing churches understand that according to the New Testament, authentic fellowship is not an option. It is a divine condition for the church.

Healthy, growing churches understand that as the bride of Christ, the church is called to discipleship. These churches understand that the church's mandate for discipleship comes directly from the Lord Jesus. Therefore, to be a disciple is a divine call for every follower of Jesus. It is not an event but a life process. And its ultimate goal is the spiritual formation of every believer into Christ-likeness.

Healthy, growing churches understand that as the body of Christ, the church is called to ministry. According to the New Testament, service is not an optional task for followers of Christ. Authentic service is not designated only for those who lead the church. Healthy, growing churches understand

that one of their divine calls is to involve in ministry all believers, according to their gifts and call.

Healthy, growing churches understand that as the people of God, the church is called to evangelize. According to the church's identity, evangelism is a divine mandate. By its nature, the church is called by the Lord of the harvest to share the good news of Christ. A healthy church understands that it is a unique, divinely empowered institution with the divine mandate and responsibility to preach the gospel and point people to Jesus Christ. Growing churches sow the gospel and do the watering, and God saves and adds. A healthy, growing church is a missionary church.

Sixth, healthy, growing churches understand what hinders growth. According to the survey and biblical teaching, many and various factors can hinder healthy church growth. The first factor that hinders church growth is inappropriate worship. Mainly, inappropriate worship is characterized by being human-centered, not trinitarian. It is not based on the Word of God, and it is not empowered by the Holy Spirit. Instead, it is reduced to a human event or program. The second obstacle to growth is inappropriate discipleship. Inappropriate discipleship is characterized by being human-centered and not Christ-centered; it is not grounded in the Word of God or empowered by the Holy Spirit. It is not concentrated on spiritual formation but on personal information. It focuses on bringing people into a building, and not helping them grow and become disciples. And when a church stops making disciples, according to the Lord's teaching, that church neglects the Great Commission

and cannot experience healthy growth. The third obstacle that hinders healthy growth is inappropriate fellowship. One of the greatest obstacles to growth is lack of authentic fellowship. Inappropriate fellowship has many different facets, but mainly it can be characterized by lack of unity, competition and conflicts among church leaders, factions inside the church, unresolved and ignored conflicts, and church members' independence. The fourth main obstacle to growth is an inappropriate approach to ministry on the part of a leader or a church member. Inappropriate ministry is characterized by indifference toward church ministries and being human-centered, with no selflessness or sacrifice. And finally, a significant obstacle to growth is inappropriate evangelism. One of the most visible signs that a church is not healthy and is not growing is neglect of sharing the good news of Christ. Inappropriate evangelism is distinguished by viewing evangelism as an optional act; the church has a poor reputation. Another sign of an inappropriate attitude toward evangelism is lack of passion and Christians' indifference toward lost people. When the church's divine purposes are altered, this will affect all the church's doing and being. Inadequacies in worship, discipleship, fellowship, service, or evangelism will hinder healthy church growth.

Seventh, healthy, growing churches understand the main factors and principles of church growth. Healthy churches understand that some specific factors and principles are essential to church growth. They understand that authentic church growth is more than implementing programs, having a

professional staff, adding numbers, human efforts, and more, even, than prayer. And these principles are

- having a biblical identity that is found in Christ. Authentic identity is distinguished by being Christ-centered, Word-grounded, and Holy Spirit-empowered.
- having biblical, authentic purposes. Authentic purposes must be Christ-centered, Word-grounded, and Holy Spirit-empowered. Healthy, growing churches understand that doing Christian activities are not sufficient. They understand that doing must correspond entirely with God's will. Nothing is more essential to church growth than understanding and implementing God's will in all doing.
- showing gratitude, praise, and holiness. Growing churches understand that worship is an indispensable call of the Christian church. They understand that the church is a worship community, called to worship God in an authentic way, and all other activities will flow from worship and will end in worship.
- keeping the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace and love. Growing churches understand that Christian fellowship is an indispensable factor for healthy church growth. Fellowship becomes an act of unity and mutual love.
- making disciples. For growing churches, discipleship is a divine command. For growing churches, the ultimate goal of discipleship is not information but spiritual formation into Christ-likeness.

- serving with selflessness and sacrifice. In growing churches, leaders are examples of dedication in ministry. They equip and encourage believers to serve God according to their gifts. In healthy, growing churches, members are not simply consumers; they become part of the ministry.
- sharing the Good News with passion and love. For growing churches, evangelism is not an option; it is a divine mandate and command. Evangelism is not reduced to an event, but it is a lifestyle.
- understanding that church growth is not optional. They know and believe Christ's promise that his church will grow and advance.

Therefore, growing churches depend totally on God, but they also will make every effort to accomplish what God has called them to do. Church growth is a result of their godly attitude toward God's call. But God made them grow.

- understanding the value and importance of prayer. Growing churches understand that prayer is indispensable to Christ's church. Churches are called first to be a house of prayer. Consequently, growing churches are led by people of prayer. They encourage common prayer, take every church decision in prayer, and honor God through a life of prayer. For healthy, growing churches, prayer is beyond all principles.

Therefore, the primary duty of a local church is to understand its divine identity and purposes and implement them according God's will. While the world's principles and contexts will change in every generation, the church's

identity and purposes never change. As the owner of the church, Jesus has already established the church's identity and purposes, and they are not changeable or negotiable. Healthy, growing churches understand their responsibility for church growth. These churches understand that their task and role is to be a channel to perform from God, through him, and for him to achieve his purposes for his glory.

And because Jesus is the owner and builder of the church, he is the One who must be given the credit for all true church growth. And since Jesus died for the church, there is no greater response to his sacrifice than, as Stephen Macchia says, "to be a church that makes Jesus smile."⁴⁸⁰

In a loud voice they sang:

"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and praise!"

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing:

"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honor and glory and power,
for ever and ever!"

Revelation 5:12-13

⁴⁸⁰ Stephen A. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Disciple* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 235.

Appendix

SURVEY/ QUESTIONNAIRE

This survey was accomplished during a congress of the Baptist Union in Moldova, March 16-17, 2006, at Jesus Savior Church. That congress was attended by pastors and missionaries from different Baptist churches in Moldova. Eighty pastors and missionaries from Moldova participated in the survey.

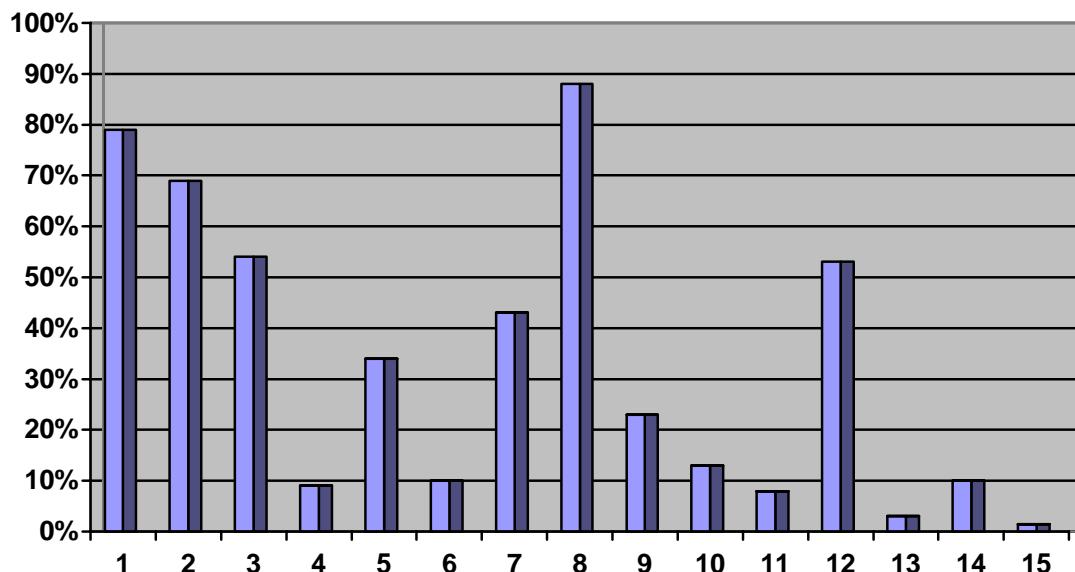
They were asked to answer to these three questions:

What, in your opinion, are the factors that determine church growth?

What, in your opinion, hinders the church's growth?

What would you love to change or improve in your church?

Factors That Determine Growth of the Local Church



1. Preaching—healthy teaching, preaching in the power or Holy Spirit, Bible study in small groups, quality of messages.
2. Unity—fellowship, love, unity between ministers and members of the church
3. Prayer—for unsaved, in groups, nights of prayer
4. Giving, generosity—financial contribution of each member
5. Vision—existence of a clear purpose, vision from the Spirit of God, each member knows his or her gift and call, each member's involvement, equipment of each member
6. Fasting—days of fasting
7. Good testimony—a good testimony of the church, of each member at work, at home, and in society, a holy life
8. Evangelism—involvement of each member in personal evangelism, mission, love and passion for unsaved people (Jesus movie, camps, VBS, crusades)
9. Discipleship—making disciples
10. Team—ministry done in teams, unity between ministers, examples for the members
11. Counseling—visiting the members
12. A dedicated pastor—powerful leadership, pastor has a servant heart, has vision, is dedicated, knows what he has to do, spiritually mature, inspires people to ministry, gives responsibilities to everyone, is a personal example in

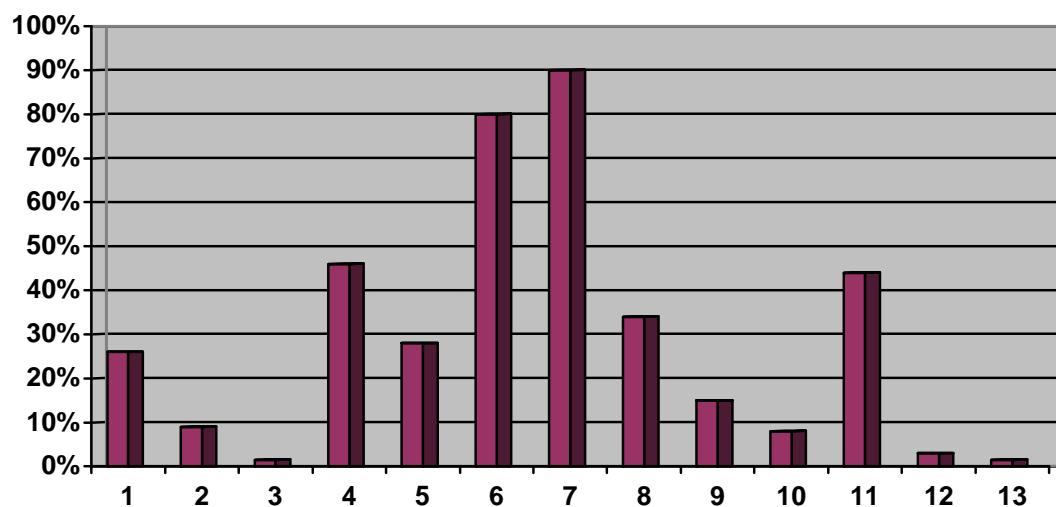
ministry, is a good testimony in the church and family, is driven by the Holy Spirit

13. Church discipline

14. Worship—worship services well prepared, high quality of music

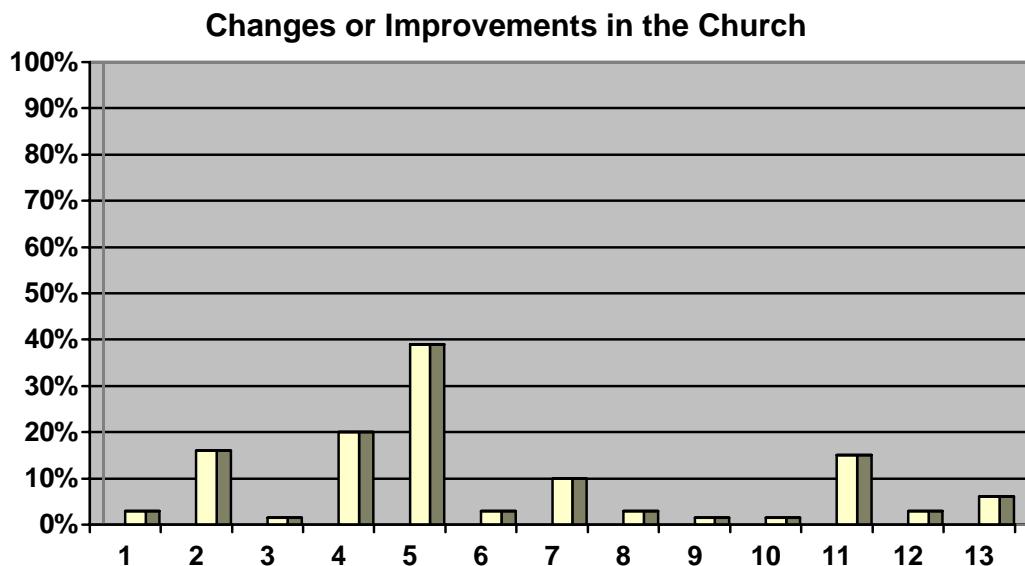
15. Youth, children—a good approach to youth ministry, children's ministry, and ministry with new Christians

Obstacles to Church Growth



1. Weak Bible study—lack of Bible study, weak sermons, a weak knowledge of the Word, lack of spiritual growth seminars, just a few people study Scripture
2. Lack of prayer and fasting
3. Lack of giving
4. Church divisions—the lack of Christian love among brothers, disputes among church members and leaders, church committees, the lack of fellowship

5. Lack of vision—a pastor without a clear vision
6. Wrong Christian testimony—compromise with sin, hidden sins, unchristian behavior
7. Indifference—lack of dedication, passivity, a church leader's indifference toward the church's needs and ministry, unconcern for unsaved people, self-satisfaction
8. Weak leader or pastor—lack of dedication, not an example of serving, not equipped enough, a wrong testimony, works by himself, does not cooperate
9. Weak youth ministry—the youth of the church are not encouraged
10. False or heretical teachings
11. Materialism—emigration, economic crisis, earthly things, personal gains from the ministry, pastor's exaggerated material possessions, church leaders overcrowded with many activities other than church
12. Lack of a clear understanding of the local church concept
13. Lack of worship building.



1. Prayer—to increase prayer in the church
- 2: Bible—to read and study more the Word of God
3. Testimony—to work on a good Christian testimony
4. Evangelism—to involve all members in sharing the gospel and increase church members' passion for lost people; every church member would become a missionary
5. Church growth—revival in the church; each church member would grow in faith and love and unity
6. Pastor—to support financially the pastor
7. Youth and children—to improve children's and youth ministries
8. Family—to equip church's families
9. Discipleship—to work with new believers
10. Vision—to have a clear vision
11. Church unity—to increase the unity among church leaders and members
12. Service—to involve more members in different ministries
13. New ministers—to prepare and equip new leaders

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alden, Robert L. *Proverbs*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983.

Allen, Ronald, and Gordon Borror. *Worship*. Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1982.

Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics*. IV.3. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1962.

Benner, David G. *The Gift of Being Yourself*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004.

Benner, David G. and Lawrence Crabb. *Sacred Companions*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002.

Bilezikian, Gilbert. *Community 101*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together*. New York: Harper, 1954.

Borthwick. Paul. *Leading the Way*. Waynesboro, GA: Gabriel Publishing, 1989.

———. *Stop Witnessing and Start Loving*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2003.

Brown, L. D. *The Life of the Church*. Nashville: Broadman, 1987.

Callahan, Kennon L. *Effective Church Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990.

Carl, George, and Warren Bird. *How to Break Growth Barriers*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993.

Clinton, Robert. *The Making of a Leader*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1988.

Clowney, Edmund P. *The Church*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995.

Colson, Charles. *The Body Being Light in Darkness*. Waco, TX: Word, 1992.

Crabb, Larry. *The Safest Place on Earth*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999.

Dawn, Marva J. *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995.

Donahue, Bill, and Russ Robinson. *Building a Church of Small Groups*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001.

Erickson, Millard J. *Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985.

———. *Introducing Christian Doctrine*. Edited by L. Arnold Hustad. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992.

Ferguson, Everett. *The Church of Christ*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996.

Flynn, Leslie B., *Nineteen Gifts of the Spirit*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1975.

Foster, Richard. *Celebration of Discipline*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998.

Getz, Gene, and Joe Wall. *Effective Church Growth Strategies*. Nashville: Nelson Reference & Electronic, 2000.

Gonton, Colin. *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991.

Hemphill, Ken. *The Antioch Effect*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994.

Hobbs, Herschel H. *Fundamentals of Our Faith*. Nashville: Broadman, 1960.

Horton, Michael. *A Better Way*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002.

Hunter, Kent. *Foundations for Church Growth*. Corunna, IN: Church Growth Center, 1984.

MacArthur, John A. Jr. *The Body Dynamic*. Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor, 1996.

Macchia, Steven A. *Becoming a Healthy Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999.

———. *Becoming a Healthy Disciple*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004.

———. *Becoming a Healthy Team*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005.

MacMillan, Pat. *The Performance Factor*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001.

Martin, Ralph P. *Worship in the Early Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976.

Maxwell, William D. *An Outline of Christian Worship*. London: Oxford University Press, 1965.

McGavran, Donald A. *Understanding Church Growth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980.

McIntosh, Gary L., and Samuel D. Rima Sr. *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997.

McNeal, Reggie. *A Work of Heart*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000.

Miller, Calvin. *The Empowered Leader*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995.

Morris, Danny E., and Charles M. Olsen. *Discerning God's Will Together*. Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1997.

Morris, Leon. *New Testament Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990.

Nouwen, Henri J. M. *Creative Ministry*. New York: Doubleday, 1991.

———. *In the Name of Jesus*. New York: Crossroad, 1989.

Peters, George W. *A Theology of Church Growth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1981.

Peterson, David. *Engaging with God*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992.

Peterson, Eugene H. *Under the Unpredictable Plant*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992.

Piper, John. *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002.

Rainer, Thomas S. *The Book of Church Growth*. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1993.

Reid, Alvin. *Introduction to Evangelism*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998.

Rendle, Gil, and Alice Mann. *Holy Conversation*. Washington, DC: Alban Institute, 2003.

Robinson, Darrell W. *Total Church Life*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997.

Robinson, Haddon W. *Biblical Preaching*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001.

Russell, Bob. *When God Builds a Church*. Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing, 2000.

Sande, Ken. *Peace Maker*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004.

Scazzero, Peter. *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*. Nashville: Integrity Publishing, 2006.

Schwarz, Christian A. *Natural Church Development*. Emmelsull, Germany: C & P Publishing, 2000.

Stedman, Ray C. *Body Life*. Glendale, CA: Regal, 1972.

Stott, John R. W. *The Message of Acts*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990.

———. *The Spirit, the Church, and the World*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990.

Thrall, Bill, Bruce McNicol, and Ken McElrath. *The Ascent of a Leader*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999.

Torrance, James B. *Worship Community and the Triune God of Grace*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996.

———. *The Forgotten Trinity*. Edited by Alasdair I. C. Heron. London: Inter-Church House, 1991.

Towns, Elmer L., John N. Vaughan, and David J. Seifert. *The Complete Book of Church Growth*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1981.

Van der Ven, Johannes A. *Ecclesiology in Context*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996.

von Allmen, J. J. *Worship*. London: Lutterworth, 1965.

Warren, Rick. *The Purpose Driven Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995.

Watson, David. *I Believe in the Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979.

Webber, Robert E. *Worship Is a Verb*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992.

Weber, Stuart K. *Holman New Testament Commentary, Matthew*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000.

White, James Emery. *Opening the Front Door*. Nashville: Convention, 1992.

White, Robert. *Healthy Kingdom Churches*. Friendswood, TX: Baxter Press, 2002.

Wiersbe, Warren W., comp. *The Best of A. W. Tozer*. Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1984.

Willard, Dallas. *Renovation of the Heart*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress 2002.

VITA

Vitalie Fedula was born on April 6, 1970, in the Republic of Moldova, into a Christian home of six children. As a teenager, his high school teachers persecuted him for not rejecting his faith in God. They would force him to become a member of Comsomol, which was a Soviet communist youth organization. He rejected their ideology, and in 1987 received Jesus Christ as his personal Savior and Lord.

In 1991, acknowledging God's will and calling to serve him, Vitalie and his wife agreed to go to Oradea, Romania, to study at the Emanuel Theological Seminary. They abandoned their jobs and by faith went to Romania for five years.

After his studies in Romania, Vitalie came back to Moldova in 1996 with his wife. They were asked to lead the youth ministry at Jesus Savior Church in Chisinau, Moldova. In the same year, Vitalie was asked to become a professor at the College of Theology and Education in Chisinau, where he continues to teach New Testament, theology, and practice of worship. From 2000 to 2005, he studied for a master of arts degree at TCM International Institute in Austria.

In 2005, Vitalie was called by the Lord through the local church to become the senior pastor of Jesus Savior Church. In several occasions Vitalie has been asked to partner with evangelistic crusades, both the Billy Graham Association and the Luis Palau Association.

Currently, Vitalie serves as the senior pastor at Jesus Savior Church and teaches at the College of Theology and Education. He is also a member of the Baptist Union Council from Moldova.

He is married to Larisa Fedula, and the Lord has blessed them with one daughter, Corina. Vitalie enrolled in the Doctor of Ministry program at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in 2005. He expects to graduate in May 2008.